

OCTOBER, 1954

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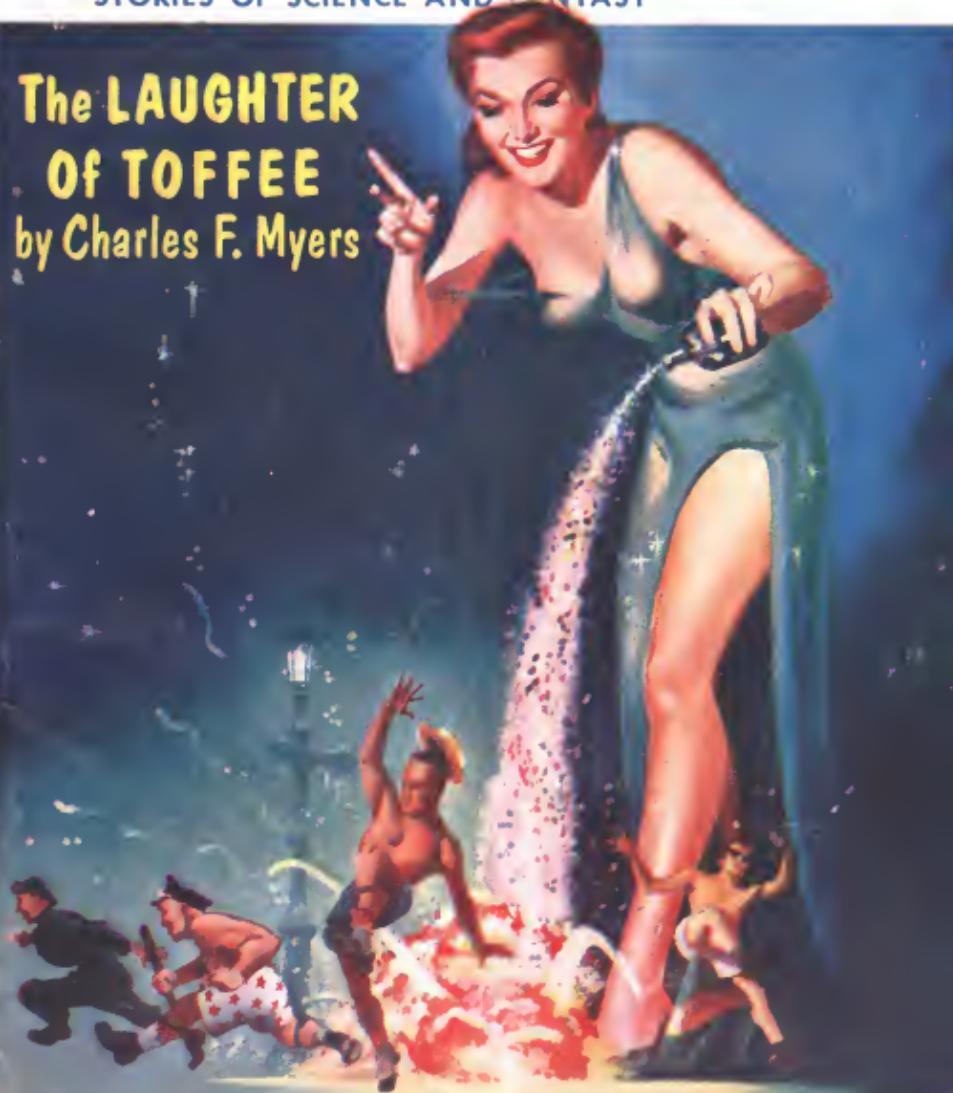
STORIES OF SCIENCE AND FANTASY

OCTOBER, 1954

35¢

The LAUGHTER OF TOFFEE

by Charles F. Myers



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VOL. 5 NO. 10
ISSUE NO. 35

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The Editorial

EVERY once in awhile a story crosses our editorial desk which makes us sit back and wonder—entertainingly, but disturbingly. Such a story is featured next month and deserves a bit of editorial comment now. We're speaking of the new Geoff St. Reynard novel, *DON'T PANIC!* Frankly, this is a story concerning flying saucers. Old stuff, you say? Not so, believe us. Nothing could be more current—or prophetic—than speculating on flying saucers. The elusive craft seem to dominate our atmosphere and the sixty-four dollar question is still—*what are they?*

WE'VE gone on record many times in the past few years stating that we're convinced they're extra-terrestrial visitors. Sure it's easy to sit smugly and state something that cannot be proven as yet by physical undeniable evidence. But we contend it's a lot easier for some of the beetle-brained skeptics to brush them aside with lofty pronouncements of, "mass hysteria!"

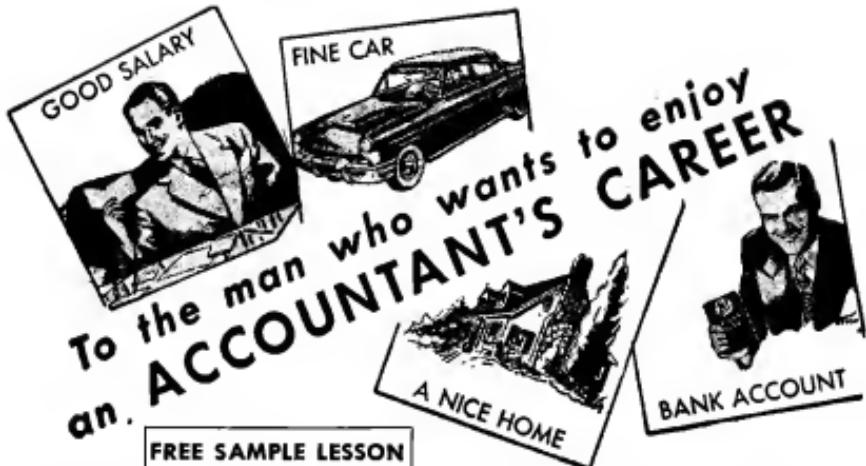
GEOFF ST. REYNARD seems to agree with us. He sat down and wrote a novel that is as grim and gripping a tale as we've read in many years. It's the kind of story you fervently hope can't be true. But it's also the kind of story you know *could* happen. That's what makes science fiction the most

interesting reading in literature. It stimulates thought, opens up new vistas to the imagination—and in many cases proves to be down-right prophecy. As we stated, we hope *DON'T PANIC!* is just plain fiction. But we also know it's not. It's science fiction. And that leaves the door wide open.

BEFORE signing off, let us remind you to get the November issue of our companion magazine, *IMAGINATIVE TALES* at your newsdealer. Two great TOFFEE novels are featured. Enough said! . . . WLH



"Sorry, sir, there are no rest stops this trip!"



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THE LAUGHTER OF TOFFEE

To the casual observer that morning Marc Pillsworth presented only the picture of a rather loose-jointed, yet constrained, businessman on his way to another orderly day at the office. One would hardly have guessed that he was striding forward into the first leg of a journey that was destined to take him on a shrieking, streaking sleigh ride of madness, frenzy and crime. Indeed, Marc himself would never have dreamed that such a thing was even possible.

The trouble was, of course, that this was the first day of spring. The world had finally shrugged itself free of winter and, with a toss of its golden curls, was unmistak-

ably casting about for some sort of foolishness to get into. The sun was burgeoning bright in the sky, green things were intruding their heads impertinently through the warm soil along the sidewalks and the breezes, gentle and flirtatious, were fingering the voluminous skirts of the passing shop girls. The inhabitants of the city, to the man, were feeling pleasantly silly in the head.

To the man, that is, except for Marc.

Marc, founder, president, guiding genius and devoted slave to the Pillsworth Advertising Agency, felt merely dyspeptic. Making his way past the shops with their blossoming window boxes, he loathed the

by Charles F. Myers

Marc's troubles began the moment Hotshot Harold planted the miracle elixir on him. Then came a bevy of cops — Toffee — and X-ray eyes . . .



spring. At the moment, in fact, there was only one thing that Marc loathed more than the spring and that was Mario Matalini, the eminent Italian portrait artist.

Marc had never before experienced jealousy and it came to him now as a singularly unpleasant sensation. For one thing, it gave him gas.

Though he had been married long enough to have achieved a certain complacency about matrimony in general, every time he thought of Julie and Mario alone at the country house, he automatically burped. Italians, it was said, were notoriously affected by cold blonde beauty, and Julie on occasion, resembled nothing so much as a tantalizing and unattainable angel carved from ice. It was a combination that was not reassuring.

The trip to the country, of course, had been Mario's idea. It had come to him in a gaudy flash of inspiration the very evening Julie had commissioned him to do her portrait.

"Ah, Madonna Mia!" the mustachioed artist had crooned revoltingly. "You shall be my masterpiece! I can feel it now. There is the season of spring in your lovely face—the enigma, the withholding, the promise!" His dark eyes caressed her classic features, and he leaned forward abruptly.

"I know!" he breathed. "I shall paint you surrounded by nature—on the very first day of spring! You will be like a goddess, with the new grasses and the first green leaves everywhere around you!" He sighed delicately. "I have never done a portrait in this manner, but how can I confine such a subject to a dismal studio?" He smiled at Julie as though Marc were not even in the room. "It is true, is it not, that you own one of the handsomest country houses in the state?"

Marc had opened his mouth to protest, but Julie's eyes were aglow with the vision of herself as a spring-time goddess. The damage had been done and there was no patching it up.

The two of them had been at the country house for a week now, looking for the perfect setting for the portrait, waiting for the perfect day to begin it. With each passing day Marc had grown a bit uneasier. Of course Mr. Busby, the caretaker, made a splendid chaperon, but there was still something about Mario that just naturally put your teeth on edge.

Business had prevented his joining the pilgrimage to the country; the summer advertising campaigns, now in preparation, demanded the last measure of his personal attention. As an active guardian of

his castle and his wife's virtue, he found himself seriously hampered. With this dark thought looming in his mind, he burped anew and halted his office-bound progress to enter a drug store. A man could hardly expect to retain his clients' good will by belching in their faces.

INSIDE the store, he proceeded to the pharmacist's counter at the rear. There, he found himself confronted by a balding, fastidious individual in a white jacket whose gaze was fastened tenaciously on the remarkable legs of the silken brunette who presided at the nearby cosmetics counter. As Marc cleared his throat, the man looked up with eyes that were gently bemused.

"Yes?" he inquired disinterestedly.

Marc leaned forward. "I need something for gas," he said.

The druggist smiled blandly, but his gaze drifted back to the fascinating legs. "Grass?" he murmured dreamily. "Grass seed is at the front of the store.

"Not grass," Marc said. "I don't want grass. 'Gas' is what I said."

"Gas?" the druggist sighed. "We don't carry gas. May I suggest a filling station?"

"You don't understand," Marc said. "I don't *want* gas, I want

to get rid of it."

The druggist regarded him uncertainly. "No sale, pal," he said. "I don't need any."

"Don't need any what?" Marc asked. The conversation was beginning to make him feel a bit dizzy.

"Gas," the druggist said. "Are you selling, door to door, or are you giving it away in samples?"

"I'd certainly like to give it away," Marc said testily. "I know just the person for it."

"No one will take it, eh?" the druggist said. "That's human nature for you. It's like this fellow who tried to give away hundred dollar bills . . ."

"I think we're at cross-purposes here," Marc broke in anxiously. "I have this gas, you see, and I want to get rid of it. Can you help me or can't you?"

"Well," the druggist said undecidedly, "I suppose I can ask around. But tell me this, why do you want to get rid of this gas? Is there something funny about it?"

"I'd hardly call it funny," Marc said stiffly. "It makes an awful noise."

"Noise?" the druggist said. "Why should it make a noise?"

"It just does!" Marc said angrily. "I can't control it."

"Then no wonder no one will

take it. There's your answer right there."

"I think you must be mad," Marc said shortly.

"I think one of us must be," the druggist agreed. He surveyed Marc's lean frame wonderingly. "Why do you keep on with this gas of yours if it makes these disgusting noises?"

"I don't want to keep on with it," Marc said desperately. "That's why I came to you."

"And on such a beautiful day, too," the druggist murmured sadly. A new thought struck him and he glanced up sharply. "Where do you keep this awful gas of yours?"

"On my stomach, of course," Marc said hotly. "Where would I keep it?"

Slowly the light of realization dawned in the druggist's face. "Oh! What you mean is you have gas on the stomach!"

"Yes," Marc said, drawing himself up. "But there's no need to shout it out to the entire store, is there?"

"You'll have to excuse me," the druggist said apologetically. "I don't know what's come over me today." His gaze reverted briefly to the legs across the aisle. "I guess there's something in the air this morning."

"I guess so," Marc said shortly.

"But do you have something for my gas?"

"Why, surely," the druggist said grandly. He reached under the counter and produced a small brown bottle filled with a syrupy liquid. "A little mixture of my own. Just drink it down and your worries are over. Just put it in your pocket. I couldn't charge you after all we've been through together."

Marc slipped the bottle into his coat pocket. He started to murmur his thanks, but the druggist's attention had returned permanently to harbor at the cosmetics counter. Marc shrugged and walked out of the store.

There certainly was something in the air, Marc reflected as he strode toward the corner, an almost tangible kind of madness. The coming of spring had turned the world giddy. You could feel it everywhere. In the country, where spring was so much more in evidence, the feeling was probably just that much more intense . . . But he tried not to dwell on that.

AT the corner the signal turned to red and as the traffic moved forward in a rush, Marc stepped back to the curb to wait. Lost in his own thought, he was not aware of the small hawk-beak-

ed individual who had stopped beside him until a pallid, nervous hand tugged lightly at his sleeve. From his height of six feet two, he turned to look down annoyedly at the crown of a drab bowler hat and the shoulders of a shabby brown suit. Shiftily the little man glanced sideways, then grinned up at him.

"Hey, man," he said furtively, "how about a look at some hot stuff straight from Paris, France. It's the real thing."

"I beg your pardon?" Marc said stiffly.

"You know," the little man said with an odious wink, "dames with their skin showin'—all the way down." With the quick movement of a conjurer he turned his hand and produced for Marc's edification the photograph of a dark-haired, not-so-young lady, peering back lasciviously over a shoulder that was bare clear down to the soles of her feet. Flushing with surprise and embarrassment, Marc looked away.

"That's one of the tame ones," the little hustler said. "Man, the others will stone you! Dig?"

"I do not dig," Marc said tersely, "and I do not wish to be stoned. Please go away."

"You mean you don't care about feminine pulchritude?" the little man asked in a scandalized tone.

"I am not interested in dirty postcards," Marc said. "As a respectable married man . . ."

The little man made a sharp sound of alarm. "You got trouble, man," he said. "Respectable and married too! I bet you're a big bomb around the house. There's nothin' a woman hates worse than bein' married to a respectable married man."

Mercifully, the light chose that moment to change, and Marc turned away. The nervous hand, however, again caught at his sleeve.

"Hold up, man," the little man said urgently. He produced a small brown bottle from the inner reaches of his disreputable suit. "I like to see people happy, man, and if ever I saw a guy in a bind, it's you. So, in your case, I'll make you an extra special exception. I'll give you a crack at this single last remaining bottle of genuine French Elixir."

"Let go of my sleeve," Marc said evenly.

The hand, nevertheless, remained. "You see here, right in front of your own eyes, one of the rare, unattainable hard-to-get exotic spring tonics of the world. It lifts the spirit and opens the eyes. It ain't harmful or habit-formin'."

Marc frowned severely. "I am not, nor do I care to become, a dope addict."

"This ain't no dope, man," the little man insisted. "I told you! It gives a guy a new perspective."

"From which he can more clearly look at the photographs of naked ladies? If that's your idea of . . ."

Marc stopped, for his adversary, seemed suddenly to go mad. Blanching, the little man hurled himself forward, apparently out of control. Colliding with Marc, he grabbled wildly with him for a moment, then abruptly shoved himself away. For a moment Marc was completely at a loss to explain this startling performance; then he caught sight of the policeman approaching from across the street.

"Sorry, man!" the purveyor of erotics said hastily and, with that, he darted off down the street.

In almost the same instant, the policeman gained the curbing on the run. He cast Marc a swift glance but kept on rapidly down the street.

Marc watched the chase bemusedly as it continued half way up the block, then out of sight into the entrance of an alley. He hoped the little peddler would be caught; a salesman of smutty pictures only added to the loose atmosphere of the day. He turned away, heading for the office. And then he stopped.

ACTUALLY it was the little man's remark about the wives

of respectable married men that halted Marc's step. Suddenly it struck him that perhaps this message had been delivered to him, through Fate, as a sort of warning. He pondered for a moment with furrowed brow, then, resolutely, he turned again and started back the way he had come. He had definitely made up his mind. Julie had taken the convertible, but the coupe was still in the garage. If he started out now, he could be at the country house well before noon, and Mario could be fired, packed and sent on his way before sunset. Business, for this one day, would have to wait.

His course of action set, Marc continued determinedly down the street. His only fear, now, was that he might be too late. Julie, quite extraordinarily, had taken her prized and priceless collection of jewels to the country, a fact which was so highly significant and disturbing. Julie was so inordinately proud of her jewels that she never removed them from the vault except for the most special of special occasions. Just what sort of special occasion she had been contemplating this time, Marc dreaded to think. By the time he had reached the alley, he had quite forgotten about the little man and the pursuing policeman. He started violently, therefore, when the

policeman suddenly materialized from the mouth of the alley and grabbed him roughly by the shoulder.

"Here you!" the policeman snarled. "Hold up there!"

"Who?" Marc said weakly. "Me?"

"Not your Aunt Fanny," the cop said sourly. His face was an angry crimson from running. "I seen you back there with Hotstuff."

"Hotstuff?" Marc said. "Oh, you mean the pictures that . . ."

"Don't give me that, mac," the cop growled. "Don't tell me you are just an innocent bystander. If you ain't that guy's confederate . . ."

"Confederate!" Marc wheezed. "Now, do I look like the sort of person who . . ."

"Exactly, mac," the cop said. "I'm used to you smooth operators." He reached in Marc's pocket and deftly removed a small packet of picture postcards. "And these look exactly like the kind of pictures you'd be sellin'."

Marc gazed down dumbly at the postcards. "Those aren't mine!" he gasped. "He must have planted them on me."

"Yeah," the cop drawled, "I've heard that one before, too."

"Now, officer," Marc said reasonably, "can you honestly think

for one minute . . ."

"I honestly can, mac," the cop said heavily. "Now come along quietly." He took Marc's arm in an iron grasp. "Be my guest."

MARC surveyed the cold grey boundaries of his cell and burped furiously.

"Tell it to the judge," the guard said and, extracting the key from the lock, ambled off down the passage.

"I certainly shall!" Marc yelled after him. "This is the most flagrant abuse of authority . . ." He gave it up and looked around at the two-tiered bunk against the wall. He walked over to it and sat down gingerly on the edge of the lower section and rested his chin in his hand. Raking back an unruly shock of sandy hair he gazed down at the floor with bewildered helplessness.

It was astonishing how swiftly life could become a rotten apple. Only a few minutes ago he had been a free and respected citizen on his way to a day of honest work; now he was a jail bird held on a charge of moral wrong-doing. The results could be disastrous, both to his business and his marriage. Julie would not regard the affair lightly; after all the pictures *had* been found on his person, no matter how they happened to be

there.

Now, his desire to get to the country was twofold. His mind filled with gloom, his gaze wandered across the floor and to the opposite wall. It lingered for a moment at the lower area of the wall, then leaped upward to a drawing which evidently was the handiwork of a previous inmate.

Whoever the artist had been, his eye for the feminine form was both exact and subtle. The girl of the drawing, though scantily clad, was, unlike the nude photographs, in no way distasteful. She reclined in space, one slender leg outstretched, a look of artful speculation in her eyes. Her hand was at her hair, having caught its silken strands between her tapering fingers.

Marc's gaze held to the drawing with unaccountable fascination. It wasn't just the excellence of the sketch that held him, but something more. Staring fixedly at the girl on the wall, it came to him that perhaps she reminded him of someone he knew. Then suddenly it came to him in a flash.

"Toffee!" he whispered.

He withdrew his gaze hastily from the drawing, trying to force his thoughts into other, less dangerous channels. At the moment, Toffee was the last thing he wanted on his mind.

The truth of the matter was that Toffee was a phenomenon to which Marc would never completely adjust. The thought that, within the depths of his own subconscious, there was a personality of such force and completeness that she had assumed a will and strength all her own, was simply too much for him. It would always upset Marc that his mere awareness of Toffee was enough to project into reality a living, breathing, hell-raising creature who was very much flesh and bone.

It was also alarming that Toffee was so completely untouched by worldly inhibitions. Not of this earthly realm, and therefore unaware of its mores and social dogmas, the girl had an absolute genius for saying and doing, in any given situation, the very thing most likely to curdle the blood and curl the hair. Worse still, though, was her curious sense of economy which caused her to regard her own physical perfection — her flaming red hair, her vivid green eyes and her scandalously voluptuous figure — as mere commodities that could not possibly be permitted to languish. To her way of thinking, that these remarkable gifts should be left unobserved, unadmired and unused was purely and shockingly sinful.

Not by any stretch of the imagination was Toffee the proper sub-

ject with which to concern one's thoughts in a jail cell. With a shudder, Marc forced his attention to his immediate predicament and leaned back in his bunk.

The shock of his incarceration was beginning to wear off a bit now, and with its passing it suddenly occurred to him that, as yet, he hadn't even been permitted to call his lawyer. Righteous indignation surging through him, and unmindful of the steel support immediately above his head, he jumped up.

The results were immediate and decisive. From Marc's point of view there was merely a sudden surprising explosion of brilliant lights inside his skull as his head struck the metal support, and the floor, insanely, began to rise, embracingly, almost seductively, to meet him.

IN the next moment he was enfolded into a world of dark beauty where illusive glimmerings in the distance gave off a curious sound that was the tinkling of very small bells. For a moment he floated languorously, then, taking bearings on a shimmering blue star, he glided forward. Just as he drew close to it, however, it shattered into a million glittering fragments and vanished.

Then he fell.

He landed on his back in a sprawl and, as he did so, the scene, like a motion picture hastily projected on a screen, leaped, all at once, into being. He glanced around at the mossy, gently-sloping hillside, the grove of finely plumed trees and the playful blue mists trailing lightly down the rise.

Marc observed these surroundings without alarm. He knew at a glance that he had retreated into the valley of his subconscious mind and, now that he was there, he was just as glad. He ran his hand sensuously over the soft greenness upon which he lay and turned his eyes heavenward to the warmly glowing, yet sunless, sky. Then, folding his hands beneath his head, he lay back and closed his eyes.

A moment passed, then there was a quick stirring at his side. Two slender fingers closed viciously over his left ear and twisted.

"Stinker!" a voice hissed. "Redolent reptile!"

Marc sat up abruptly. "Hey!" he yelled. Toffee's pert face was almost nose to nose with his own. "Let go!"

"If I do," Toffee threatened, "it will only be to grab something much worse!"

"Don't be vulgar," Marc said uneasily.

She was kneeling beside him, her red hair cascading like inverted

flame on one beautifully-molded shoulder. Her green eyes were aglitter with a lovely fury. As always, she was clothed only in the brief emerald tunic which, because of its extreme transparency, did nothing to hide her lithesome body, though it made up for this failure by accentuating each softly-curved perfection to the utmost. On her feet was a pair of gold sandals of some undetermined material.

"I should twist your faithless head off," she said. "In fact I've been keeping some plasma on ice just in case I decide to murder you in cold blood."

"This is hardly the greeting I expected," Marc said, nursing his ear.

"Of course not," Toffee said. "You expected me to fawn on you. You wanted me to chuck you under the chin and stroke your brow. Well, if I ever do, it will probably be with a ball bat."

"I'm darned if I see what you're so sore about," Marc said injuredly.

"You don't?" Toffee said. "I should be content, I suppose, just because you're here! Well, I'm not. I saw what you were thinking about me a while ago."

"What I was thinking?"

"Good old Toffee!" Toffee sighed. "Keep her repressed. Let her languish. Let her rot. Who cares

that this is the first day of spring and everyone else is enjoying it?" She traced the curve of his jaw fatefully with her finger. "I ought to bust you one."

"But I was having so much trouble . . ." Marc protested weakly.

"Trouble!" Toffee said. "You just *thought* you had trouble."

Marc met her insinuating gaze with a sense of inner trembling. "What do you mean by that?" he asked.

"Guess," Toffee said. "Just guess."

"You wouldn't materialize, would you? You wouldn't . . ."

"Give the man a cigar, a baby doll and a kick in the pants," Toffee said lightly. "You got it right on the first try."

Marc paled. "But you can't!" he said. "Not now!"

"Can't I?"

"But you mustn't!"

TOFFEE lowered herself sinuously to his side and leaned close to him. She observed him amusedly through langorously lowered lids. "You're going to see a lot of me, lover," she crooned, "in more ways than one. If you want a word of sound advice, just relax and enjoy it. That way, you won't get quite so messed up."

"Now, don't . . ." Marc said thinly. "This is no time for non-

sense!"

"This is precisely the time for nonsense," Toffee said, slipping a cool, slim arm determinedly around his neck.

"Don't start anything!" Marc cried, trying without success to disentangle himself. Let go of me, you thinly-draped hussy."

"I only wonder why I'm so good to you," Toffee sighed. "I suppose it's because you may not live much longer—if you don't behave yourself."

"You're not good to me!" Marc said desperately. "You're awful! You're worse than . . ."

Whatever Toffee was worse than never came to light, for Marc's words were smothered beneath a warm, lingering kiss that went beyond words. A moment passed before she released him.

"There," Toffee said. "Now it doesn't matter if you survive; your life has been rich and full."

"Now, see here, you," Marc said forcefully. "If you're thinking I'm going to lounge around with you . . ."

"I'm only wondering if you're strong enough," Toffee said.

"Stop saying things like that!" Marc said, holding his voice steady with an effort. "I'm not exaggerating when I say that you absolutely must not materialize—not even a finger!"

"Oh, never just a finger!" Toffee said with false alarm. "I intend to go much farther than that."

"Evidently," Marc said. "But you must realize . . ."

He stopped, for suddenly the valley had begun to blur, strangely, as though it were seen through a panel of water-washed glass. Even as the words died in his throat, a heavy greyness dripped through the sky, dulling its radiance. On the horizon, the odd, feathery trees seemed to melt and merge, and the grass upon which they were sitting became a wavering sea of misty green.

"Oh, my gosh!" Marc gasped. He turned to Toffee, his eyes filled with alarm. "Now, you've got to take me seriously . . ."

"Oh, I will!" Toffee said happily, locking her arms around his neck. "I'm going to be positively grim about you!"

"No!" Marc cried. "Let go of me!" The darkness was coming rapidly now, and the last traces of the sky were nearly gone. "Let go!"

"If I feel myself slipping," Toffee said breathlessly, "I'll just hook my fingers in your ears." She drew her lips close to his ear. "Lover," she murmured, "I'm going to stick to you like a barnacle on a boat. You'll never scrape me

off!"

MARC stirred. He inched his hand forward tentatively over the cold relentless surface of the floor and opened his eyes. For a moment he couldn't think where he was, then the dull grey walls and the barred-in opening that looked out on the passage brought it all back to him. He raised himself to his knees and crawled forward. He grasped the bars and dragged himself partially upright. Then he froze, staring fixedly ahead.

At first it seemed only that his sight had dulled. Then slowly, out in the passage, the haziness before him began to take form, languidly, easily, gathering itself into a dismaying solidity. A bit at a time, Toffee, working from the toes up, appeared in all her vivid aliveness on the other side of the bars. Standing there against the background of iron greyness, she seemed even more outrageously alive and lovely than she had in his subconscious mind. And also more naked. She turned to Marc and regarded him quizzically.

"Oh, no!" Marc wailed. "No, no! You can't be here!"

"But I am, Toffee said brightly. She studied the bars between them with an air of bafflement. "What are you doing in

that cage? Why don't you come out?"

"I can't come out," Marc said. "This is a jail. I'm locked in."

"And I'm locked out," Toffee observed without favor. "We'll never get anywhere that way. Where do I go to get the key?"

"You can't get the key," Marc said. "The jailer—or somebody—has it—out there." He made a vague gesture toward the iron door at the end of the passage.

"Then, I'll go ask him for it," Toffee said blandly and started away.

"No!" Marc yelled. "Don't go out there! Not like that!" He pressed urgently against the bars. "Come back here!"

Perhaps it was the effort or maybe it was the awful thought of Toffee loose in the jail, but suddenly it was all too much for him. Marc's knees buckled and he slid toward the floor. Slowly he crumpled and sprawled backwards. With an anguished murmur he passed out.

At the end of the passage, reaching for the door, Toffee quickly faded and vanished into thin air.

It was only three minutes later when Sergeant Feeney, absorbed in a copy of *Shocking Stories*, looked up apprehensively over the edge of the magazine and turned a ghastly white. If he had not been

mistaken—and he certainly had not—there was an odd sort of fuzziness in the air just beyond his feet at the other side of the desk. As he watched this clouded bit of atmosphere, it alarmingly solidified, a bit at a time, and became a strikingly beautiful redhead, clothed merely in what appeared to be a pair of translucent kitchen curtains. The sergeant gulped, and the magazine, which was already trembling like a leaf in a wind storm, dropped from his nerveless hand.

"Here, now!" Sergeant Feeney gulped. "What do you think you are up to, you?"

As soon as he had spoken, the sergeant was overwhelmed with a sense of his own utter foolishness; the girl was obviously nothing more than a trick of imagination and everyone knew that such things, no matter how industriously one might question them, could not answer back.

"I'm looking for the key," Toffee replied amiably. "Marc fainted, but I guess he's better now, or I wouldn't be here, would I? I have to go away when he's asleep but when he wakes up I come right back again."

THE sergeant jumped to his feet, upsetting his chair with a deafening clatter. "Here, now!"

he yelled. "Stop that!"

"Stop what?" Toffee asked innocently.

"Stop talking to me, now!" Sergeant Feeney gasped. "I'm a sober upright minion of the law, and it's not right that the likes of you should come jabberin' around so's I can hear it."

"Well, I don't see why not," Toffee said bewilderedly. "How am I going to get the key, if I don't ask you for it?"

"There you go again!" the sergeant wailed. Trembling in every fiber of his great hulking being, he turned away from her. "If you don't stop it, now," he said, "I'm going to close my eyes, and then you won't be there."

"But I have to have the key," Toffee protested.

"That does it!" the sergeant said woundedly. He closed his eyes so tightly they might never have existed. "There, now!"

"Where?" Toffee said.

The sergeant visibly flinched. "Where what?" he asked faintly.

"Where's the key?"

"What key, for heaven's sake?"

"The key to the cages, of course. Where is it?"

The sergeant sighed. Then he straightened, and when he spoke again there was an edge of craftiness to his voice. "If I point out the key to you, will you take it and

go away?"

"Instantly," Toffee agreed.

Promptly the sergeant pointed to the wall where the key hung on a metal hook. "Help yourself," he said grandly. "And a pleasant journey to you."

"Thank you very much," Toffee said. "For so complete an imbecile, you've been most cooperative." Moving to the hook, she removed the key, and swinging it lightly on her finger, left the room.

The sergeant waited until he heard the door close, then opened his eyes. Looking about, he began to chuckle to himself.

"Now, isn't it a wonder how easy you can outsmart a hallucination?" he said to himself. "She's gone away happy as a lark, and anybody knows a mere thing out of the thin air could never steal a key."

ONLY five minutes later Marc and Toffee descended the steps of the jail and paused for a moment in the sun. Marc, still a little woozy in the head, waited for his thoughts to clear.

"Are you sure he gave you that key?" he asked.

"He fairly begged me to take it," Toffee said. She glanced around happily at the bright spring day. "What wonderful weather," she said. "It makes you want to buy

things, doesn't it, scandalous things that hold you in just enough so that you can go all out. If you know what I mean."

Marc glanced down at her brief costume. In the morning sun it seemed almost non-existent. Quickly he took off his coat and held it out to her. "Here!" he said imperatively, "put this on!"

"On one condition," Toffee said. "I want a new dress. I'm through hinting about it."

"And you shall have one," Marc agreed. "No one ever needed one more acutely."

With mild regret Toffee put the coat on. In it, she looked rather like a shapely scarecrow whose lack of hands had been more than amply compensated for by a pair of stunningly formed legs. This settled, Marc shook his head, just to get the remaining cobwebs out, and looked around.

"Are you sure this is all right," he asked, "my leaving like this?"

"The man gave me the key, didn't he?" Toffee said.

"I don't know," Marc said doubtfully. "I can't think quite clearly, but somehow it doesn't seem quite regular."

"Regularity is so dull," Toffee said, "in spite of what all those cereal manufacturers say."

Shrugging, Marc followed along as she started off down the street.

A passing delivery boy, catching sight of the briefly-draped redhead, paused to whistle. Toffee waved at him happily and whistled back.

"Don't do that!" Marc said. "Stop attracting attention to yourself!"

Toffee grinned up at him. "It's myself that attracts attention to me, she said. "You made me that way and I must say I dearly love you for it." Glancing down the street, her gaze stopped at a tall department store building which was fronted by long, gleaming show windows. She pointed to it eagerly. "That looks wonderfully extravagant," she said. "Let's go charge things to your account."

As they approached the store, Marc's step became firmer, his head unclouded. He stopped just outside the entrance with an abrupt burp.

"I just remembered," he said. "I've got to get out to the country house. I . . . What am I going to do with you, though?"

"You're going to buy me a ridiculous dress at a ridiculous price," Toffee said. "We'll worry about Julie and her shabby amours with that lecherous paint-dauber later."

"How did you know about that?" Marc asked.

"From sitting around in that arid mind of yours," Toffee said. "Sometimes I tune in on what's go-

ing on just out of sheer boredom."

MEANWHILE, within the jail, a moiling drama of considerable scope was swiftly reaching a head. Sergeant Feeney had discovered, with much goggling of the eyes, that hallucinations not only could steal keys, but had. With a thrill of horror he called in the members of the force on duty, six in all, and instituted an inspection of the cells. In due time, it was noted that the jail's prize prisoner had flown the coop.

"Mary, mother of triplets!" Sergeant Feeney shrieked. "We gotta get that bird back in his cage before the chief hears of this!"

"He couldn't have gotten too far away, sergeant," one of the city's hearties observed moodily. "We better scour the streets, I think."

"That's it!" Sergeant Feeney rasped, rushing blindly toward the hallway. "Scour the streets men! Everybody scour! Follow me!"

THUS it was that Marc and Toffee, standing before the entrance to the store, glanced casually back along the street just in time to witness a disquieting eruption of blue-clad figures from the doorway of the jail. So astonishing was the sight that they stood for a moment too long watching it; *Sergeant Feeney, catching sight of

them, pointed an excited finger in their direction.

"There they are!" he roared.
"After them, men!"

"The bloodhounds!" Toffee yelled. Taking Marc's arm, she dragged him forcibly through the entrance and inside the store. Counters laden with colorful spring merchandise stretched before them in what seemed like endless rows. A floor manager observed them curiously, and then moved away.

"Come on!" Toffee said.

"You're insane!" Marc said. By now Toffee had led him to the stairs. "We can't be bothered with dresses at a time like this."

"I'm going to have a spring dress," Toffee said determinedly. "No matter what!"

A dark browed lady, upon overhearing this snatch of dialogue, observed the ascending pair with brooding thoughtfulness. She turned triumphantly to the pallid, grey-suited individual at her side, on whom had befallen the misfortune of becoming her husband.

"There! she said, pointing up the stairs to Toffee's flashing legs. "That's exactly what I'm going to do next time I tell you I haven't anything to wear and you ignore me. I'm going to strip down to the skin and shame you in public. Then we'll see!"

"Then, everyone will see," the

man observed gloomily. "There will probably be fainting in the streets."

At this juncture, as Marc and Toffee disappeared up the stairs, there was a blast at the entrance of the store, announcing that Sergeant Feeney, his redoubtable six and his whistle had arrived and the situation was slipping rapidly out of hand.

"Everyone stay where you are!" the good sergeant bellowed, charging about frenziedly. "Everyone keep calm!" And so saying he dashed headlong into a small grey-haired lady and knocked her forthwith to the floor.

Displaying an agility not to be looked for in so old a party, the sergeant's victim leaped to her feet and snatched up her parasol.

"Fool!" she snapped. "Idiot!"

"Stop hopping about!" the sergeant yelled, sitting up. "Everybody stay still!"

"How can I stay still when you keep knocking me down?" the little woman demanded hotly. She rapped the sergeant smartly across the bridge of the nose to emphasize her point. "Lummox!"

The sergeant grabbed at his nose and observed the lady with deep-seated hostility. "Lady," he said, "you're tamperin' with the law, you are!"

"You've tampered with worse than that! the little lady retorted. "If I were a little younger I'd have you for mashing!"

Meanwhile, Marc and Toffee, taking the stairs two at a time, had reached the third floor where, in a dim cavern of soft lights and muted music, the Parisian styles were being displayed, as they should be, on lovely living models. Marc turned to Toffee and burped impatiently.

"If you're determined to do this," he said, "be quick about it." He burped again. "The law is practically breathing down our necks!"

"Why do you keep making that revolting noise?" Toffee asked interestedly. "It sounds like hogs rooting in the mire."

Marc winced at her indelicacy. "I can't help it," he said. "When I'm upset it affects my stomach."

"Then do something about it," Toffee commanded airily and drifted away.

Marc started to protest that there was very little he could do about it as long as she kept him upset, when he remembered the bottle the druggist had given him and took it from his pocket. Removing the cap, he took a deep, hurried draft. This done, he screwed the cap back on and replaced the bottle in his pocket.

HE completed this maneuver just in time, for no sooner did the syrup hit his gullet than he issued an explosive cough and staggered forward as though he had received a healthy blow from and to the rear. The liquid burned inside him like liquid fire.

Gasping, he beat his chest for relief and steadied himself against the wall with a trembling hand. The dizziness that he had only just gotten rid of, returned. He closed his eyes in the hope that it would pass.

His eyes were still closed when the scream issued piercingly from across the room. Opening them, he glanced across to where the models appeared and almost wished he hadn't bothered. It was too insane.

Toffee had evidently found the dress she wanted, an ethereal affair consisting of a couple of scraps of filthy stuff arranged to make its wearer look like nothing so much as a gift-wrapped Diana out for the kill. As Parisian dresses went, Marc supposed that this flimsy confection was only a little bit worse than most, but it had one glaring flaw which almost anyone—anyone, that is, but Toffee—would have noticed at a glance; the dress was still on the model. Toffee, however, was not deterred, not even by the girl's desperate screams.

She was industriously disrobing the poor creature before the startled eyes of the other customers.

Marc, forgetting his dizziness, shoved himself away from the wall and ran forward. "Stop!" he yelled. "You can't do that!"

Toffee cast him a fleeting glance over her shoulder, but did not stop her frantic efforts with the illusive dress and the struggling model.

"It's difficult all right," she shot back, "but I think I can manage."

"Madam, please!" the model shrieked, her air of aloof stateliness demolished. "Oh, *please!*"

From a curtained doorway, a small dark woman, the manageress of the department, looked out and emitted a thin cry of disbelief. The model, now stripped to the waist, was hugging herself in a paroxysm of horror. Throwing back the curtains, the manageress ran forward.

"Madam!" she cried. "Madam! You really mustn't!" She hastened to Toffee's side and tried to pull her away from the terrified girl. "If you like the dress, please step back to the fitting room."

"Step back to the fitting room yourself!" Toffee snapped. "And don't call me madam!"

"But the model . . ."

"She'll have to take her chances," Toffee gritted determinedly. "I need this dress worse than she does." The skirt came

free in her hand, revealing the model in nothing more than a pair of very sheer panties.

"Oh, madam! the girl wailed.

"Well, don't just stand there, exposing yourself!" the manageress cried. "Grab something and put it on!"

Gazing about frantically, the girl's eyes shot to the next model who had been displaying a negligee when all the trouble started. Reaching out, she deftly grabbed the zipper and yanked. The garment relinquished its hold and slithered to the floor in a vaporous cloud. The first model snatched it up and hurriedly put it on. The second model, finding herself revealed in the flesh, announced her shock in a shrill scream and made a wild grab for the mink coat that lay in the lap of a nearby customer. The customer, however, was too quick for her. Despite her over-padded figure, she shot out of her chair on the run.

"No you don't!" she screamed, "not after all I went through to get this!"

"Come back here!" the model yelled determinedly and took out in hot pursuit.

AS bedlam became the general order of the day in the salon, Sergeant Feeney and his crew charged heroically up the stairway,

announcing their arrival with a shrill blast from the sergeant's whistle. At the sight of the scrambling customers and models, the men in blue jolted to a flat-footed halt.

"Lord in heaven!" the sergeant gasped, removing the whistle from his lips. The fur-bearing customer and denuded model shot past him, collided with a plaster mannequin and tumbled to the floor in a frantic tangle of arms, legs and mink. The sergeant flushed furiously and turned back to his followers. "Scour lightly here, men," he said. "We don't want nobody bruised."

Taking advantage of the sergeant's momentary dismay, Marc shoved a bill into the hand of the screaming manageress, grabbed Toffee, who had now struggled into the dress, and, flanking the befuddled law, led her quickly to the stairs.

"Hurry!" he said. "And be quiet."

"You're under arrest!" the sergeant roared behind them. "Everybody's under arrest—probably!"

In record time, Marc and Toffee gained the level of the second floor and kept on running. As they ran, Toffee returned Marc's coat and he slipped it on.

The pain from the gas medicine had departed now, and Marc was

feeling better. In fact, now that he stopped to think about it, he was feeling so much better he was actually beginning to enjoy himself. Striding forward, counters, customers and gaping clerks fading rapidly into the background, he even found time to admire Toffee's new finery.

"That's probably the briefest dress known to man," he remarked amiably.

"I hope it shall be well-known to man," Toffee returned happily. "One man in particular. At least I shall endeavor to make it count for the most."

"Or the least," Marc said.

Arms and legs flashing, they quitted the china department and, according to the signs, entered Sportswear on the left and Imported Liquots on the right. Thinking this a curious arrangement of merchandise, Marc turned to Toffee. He started to speak, then jolted to a halt with a thin wheeze of astonishment. Toffee stopped and turned back.

"What's the matter?" she asked. "What are you gaping at?"

Marc could hardly believe his eyes. He had turned to Toffee only to observe one of the most astonishing and upsetting things he had ever witnessed. Before his very gaze, her new dress was slowly dissolving into nothing. Already,

the skirt had melted away to her thighs.

"Holy smoke!" Marc gasped. Then, feeling that affairs were rapidly going too far, he looked quickly away. He fixed his eyes firmly on a female mannequin costumed for tennis.

"What's the matter with you?" Toffee demanded.

"Your dress . . ." Marc said weakly.

"My dress?" Toffee said. "What's the matter with my dress? I thought you liked it."

Marc opened his mouth to answer, but the words refused to come; suddenly he was confronted by still another cause for alarm. The phenomenon that had so mysteriously struck Toffee had now transferred itself to the mannequin. As he stared at it, the clothes began to fade from its plaster torso with unbelievable rapidity.

"Good heavens!" Marc rasped. "Look at that!"

"Look at what?" Toffee said, staring at the mannequin. "What are you carrying on so about?"

Marc took a breath. "Don't you see anything funny about that dummy?"

Toffee observed the dummy more closely. "Very dull," she said. "No sex appeal. Maybe it's those shorts she's wearing."

"Shorts?" Marc said. "You mean

you can still see shorts—and things?"

"What are you babbling about?" Toffee said hopelessly. "What's wrong with that dummy, anyway?"

Marc stared at the mannequin wonderingly. "Good Lord!" he breathed, "I've developed X-ray eyes! As far as I'm concerned that dummy's as naked as a plucked chicken."

"But that's impossible!" Toffee said.

"Yes," Marc said, "but it's true. To me, that dummy is sheer unadorned plaster and nothing else. This is awful!"

"Maybe it will wear off," Toffee said uneasily.

JUST then a bejewelled matron appeared at the end of the aisle. Inadvertently Marc glanced in her direction, then shudderingly looked away again; the woman's dress had melted away and she had been left strolling amongst the counters in only her girdle. Marc lowered his head and waited for her to pass.

"This is shocking!" he groaned. "I can't go around like this, seeing everyone without their clothes! It's indecent!"

"But how did it happen?" Toffee asked. "If we knew what caused it, maybe we could do something about it."

There was not time for Marc to answer this, for right on cue, with a blast from his whistle, Sergeant Feeney and his underlings swarmed at the head of the aisle.

"Duck!" Toffee hissed and, crouching down, vanished swiftly into the inner reaches of Imported Liquors.

Marc, followed this example, dropped to his hands and knees and scrambled behind the nearest counter in Sportswear. The official scufflings at the entrance grew louder.

"Spread out, men!" Sergeant Feeney thundered. "Check everybody!"

Behind the counter Marc settled back against the merchandise drawers. Then he jumped as a feminine voice sounded close beside him.

"May I help you, sir?" the voice inquired.

Marc, without thinking, looked around. A large, brassy blonde with circles under her eyes had hunkered down beside him. She smiled broadly at his glance.

"It's nice to get down here away from the noise and confusion, isn't it, sir?" she said throatily. "The customer is always right in this store—especially as far as I'm concerned."

As she spoke, the upper half of her dress slowly disappeared, re-

vealing the most remarkably full net brassiere. Coloring prettily, Marc hastily snapped his eyes shut.

"Leave me alone!" he said in tones of anguish. Please go away!"

"Go away?" the blonde said woundedly. "But I thought . . . Three men have pinched me already today and, the way you crept in here, I thought maybe you were the more earnest type."

"I'm quite earnest," Marc said soberly. "In fact . . ."

"Goody," the girl said. She snuggled down beside him. "Now, what do we do?"

"I don't know what to do," Marc said miserably, "that's just it!"

"You don't?" the girl said unbelievingly. "You certainly don't expect me to tell you, do you?"

"How could you?" Marc asked reasonably.

"Well, I could, I guess, if I wasn't a lady," the girl said with a touch of pique. "Why are you squinting at me like that?"

"The light hurts my eyes," Marc said briefly. "Really, I think you ought to go away."

The girl sighed deflatedly. "I guess I might as well," she said. "You're too ignorant and I'm too refined. I must say, though," she added wistfully, "for a minute there I expected great things." She started to move away.

"Just a minute!" Marc said

quickly.

The girl fairly whirled around again. "Yes?" she said. "Have you thought of something?"

"Yes," Marc said. "Since this is the sportswear department, I assume you have dark glasses?"

The girl sighed again. "There are some around somewhere," she said.

"Well, find me some," Marc said, "only make them darker—dark enough that I won't be able to see through them at all. Paste cardboard inside them or something."

The girl looked at him quizzically, then shrugged. "Okay," she said. "I know when I'm licked."

"And hurry," Marc urged. "There's no time to lose."

THE blonde departed, and Marc's attention was taken by a hurried scuffling in the aisle. He opened his eyes and cautiously peered out. A series of blue-clad legs, that, even as he watched them, turned bare and hairy, raced by. When they had passed, Marc leaned back again and gave himself over to a moment of quiet and confused contemplation.

He tried hard to find some clue to the cause of his extraordinary eye affliction, but arrived at nothing definite. There was a rustling at his side and he turned to find

that the blonde had rejoined him. He closed his eyes again as the net brassiere, for a second time, began to appear from beneath the fading fabric of her dress.

"Here are the glasses," the blonde said coldly. "I put tape on the inside of the lenses." Marc held out his hand and she gave them to him. "Your eyes certainly must be sensitive."

"You'll never know," Marc said gloomily and slipped the glasses on.

"Can you see anything at all?" the blonde asked inquisitively.

"Not a thing," Marc said. "It's a great relief."

"Mister," the blonde said flatly, "I guess I just don't understand you."

There was the sound of stealthy approach from the direction of the aisle, and Marc quickly lowered the glasses to observe Toffee approaching on tip-toe. She was carrying a bottle of champagne under each arm and she looked enormously pleased.

"I think they've gone," she said. Then, seeing the blonde, suspicion flickered in her eyes. "Leave it to you; all I have to do is turn my back and you're snuggled up with some big blonde."

"I'm not snuggled up," Marc said. "I've been making a purchase."

"Of what?" Toffee said sharply. "These glasses," Marc said. "The young lady was good enough to fix them so you can't see through them."

"Just glasses," the blonde murmured regretfully. "And that's all." She made a small sound of disillusionment. "And I thought this was going to be my lucky day, too."

"It is," Toffee said. "If anything had passed between you two besides a pair of glasses, you'd be wearing your neck off the shoulder this season."

"Where did you get the champagne?" Marc broke in. "Or is that a subject too delicate to discuss?"

"Almost," Toffee said grandly. "I ran into a salesman in Imported Liquors with foreign ideas. We indulged in a bit of hand-wrestling amongst the East Indian wines, and he lost. He's resting quietly now, however." She held out one of the bottles of champagne. "I used this to defend myself. She shoved the bottle into Marc's hand. "Let's get slightly damp."

Meanwhile the blonde had begun to edge away.

"Leaving?" Marc asked pleasantly.

"I'm going over to Imported Liquors," the blonde said.

She departed, and Marc ex-

tracted the cork from the bottle with a fruity pop and handed it back to Toffee.

"A pause for refreshment," he said, "and then we've got to do something about my eyesight. Did you say the cops have gone?"

"The last I saw of them," Toffee said, "they were lumpling through ladies' lingerie, headed for silverware and china." She paused for a deep drink from the bottle. "With the head of steam they had worked up they should be far beyond the horizon by now."

"Good," Marc said. He received the bottle from Toffee and drank thirstily. "Cops have a positive talent for being disagreeable."

"A bad lot," Toffee nodded. "They tend to weigh on the spirit. And speaking of spirits don't keep sucking at that bottle all day. Save some for me."

TWENTY minutes later, one bottle depleted, the other tucked protectively beneath Toffee's arm, the two emerged unsteadily from behind the counter and started on an uneven course down the aisle.

"You'll have to lead me," Marc said thickly. "I can't see a thing."

Toffee took his hand. "Blind as a drunken bat," she giggled.

"You will probably lead me astray," Marc said happily.

"I shall do my best," Toffee said. "Luckily, I'm familiar with the route."

Marc held back for a moment. "I've just figured it out," he said. "It was that burp medicine that affected my eyes. We've got to go look up that druggist."

"All right," Toffee said. "But if I had X-ray eyes I would be content to stand on street corners and whistle."

This concluded, they tottered on to the end of the aisle and down the stairs.

"Going astray!" Marc sang vaporphishly. "Going astray! I'm jus' going astray!"

With a wild lurch the two fugitives precariously left the stairs and emerged onto the first floor. As they started unsteadily down the aisle a veiled and voluminous lady in black turned from her examination of a silk blouse and observed their progress with smiling approval. She turned benignly to the sales girl who was serving her.

"Isn't that sweet?" she murmured. "Imagine a stunning girl like that sacrificing a day to take her poor old blind father shopping."

Toffee and Marc proceeded in a more or less orderly fashion to the doorway, leaving the good Sergeant to ransack a store now empty of its quarry.

FIVE minutes later and three blocks removed from the department store, the two law-evaders paused to reconnoitre. Or at least Toffee reconnoitred while Marc, still sightless behind his glasses, awaited directions. He held out his hand in readiness, waiting to be led. At his side, Toffee momentarily broke her mood of concentration.

"As I see it," she said, "our next move is to flee the city."

"But what about the druggist?" Marc said. "I've got to find out about my eyes." He stopped as he became aware of a nervous tugging at his sleeve.

"Hey, man," a voice said, "I've been lookin' for you everywheres."

Marc hastily lowered his glasses. He glanced down to find a familiar shifty-eyed, weasle-like face peering up at him.

"You!" he said.

"Yeah, man," the diminutive peddler of lewd pictures grinned. "You still got the cool stuff, huh?"

"The cool stuff?" Marc said with sudden stiffness. "If you mean that collection of disgusting pictures, no I haven't got them. At the moment, I believe they're listed as Exhibit A in the case of *The People against Marcus G. Pillsworth*."

"Man!" the little man wailed. "You mean somebody goofed and

the cops got 'em?"

"Precisely," Marc said frigidly.

"Who's this Pillsworth cube?"

Marc drew himself up into a living tower of glowering hauteur. "I am Marcus G. Pillsworth," he said nastily.

"You!" the little man said. "You got hooked with the goods?"

"I got hooked," Marc said flatly, "with the goods just where you planted it on me."

"Jeez!" the little man cried despairingly. "You just can't rely on nobody no more." He chewed his lip for a moment, then looked up at Marc anxiously. "What about the French Elixir? Did the bulls heist that, too?"

"French Elixir?" Marc said. "I don't know anything about your French Elixir."

"The hell you don't, man," the little man said. "I faded it into your coat pocket. Did they find it?"

Marc paused. A chill of apprehension skittered up his spine. "Into my coat pocket," he said. "A small brown bottle?"

"It wasn't a big blue jug," the little man said impatiently. "You still got it?"

Marc reached into his pocket and pulled out, first one brown bottle, then another. They were almost identical except that the liquid in the one marked 'French Elixir'

had been depleted by approximately one fourth.

"Good night!" Marc yelled. "I drank the wrong stuff!"

"You drank the Elixir!" the little man said. He snatched the bottle from Marc's hand. "You drank it?"

"I said I drank it," Marc said distractedly.

"Then, you owe me twenty bucks, man. That bottle of genuine, hard-to-get French Elixir sells for fifty, sixty dollars." He held out his hand. "Pad my palm, friend."

"I certainly will not pad your palm," Marc said indignantly. "Do you know what that stuff's done to me?"

"Huh?" The little man paused reflectively. "How should I know what it done," he said. "They say all sorts of stuff could happen to you, according to how you're repressed." He regarded Marc interestedly. "What happened?"

"I've got X-ray eyes!" Marc said dramatically. "That's what happened."

The little man looked at him skeptically. "What's X-ray eyes?"

"When I look at people," Marc said, "I see right through their clothes. If I didn't have these glasses on everyone on this street would be stark naked."

THE little man made a thin whistling sound, then began to chuckle. "Lord, man," he laughed, "you ain't got X-ray eyes, you just got a dirty mind!"

"What!" Marc said.

"That's all!" the little man said. "It was all explained to me. The stuff works different on different people. It lets out what you've been pluggin' up inside. Oh, man," he chortled, "and you gave me the freeze for showin' you those French postcards!"

"I do not have a dirty mind," Marc said, "and even if I did, it would hardly be any business of yours. The point is that this awful elixir of yours has made a mess of things."

"At least," Toffee put in, "it's given us a devil of a handicap."

The little man looked at Toffee directly for the first time and obviously was struck by what he saw. "Who's the cool chunk of stuff?" he asked. He moved in close to Toffee and put a hand casually on her shoulder. "Just call me Hotstuff Harold, honey," he murmured. "That's how I'm referred to by all my intimate friends."

"If you don't keep your grimy little paws to yourself," Toffee said evenly, "they'll soon be referring to you as 'the deceased.'"

"It's nice that you two are acquainted," Marc said sourly,

"but that still doesn't solve my problem." Peering over the top of his glasses, he fixed Hotstuff Harold with a beady eye. "How do I get rid of the effects of this awful elixir of yours?"

"As far as I know," Hotstuff said, "all you can do is wait for it to wear off."

"And how long will that take?"

"Who knows?" Hotstuff shrugged. "I ain't never messed with the stuff. Maybe I been repressin' a better nature and it would come out and ruin my life's work."

"I doubt it," Marc said. "But there must be something I can do about this."

"If I was you, man, I'd go sit in a Marilyn Monroe picture until they kicked me out." Hotstuff put his hand to Marc's sleeve. "You still owe me some bucks, boy. Twenty for the pictures and twenty more for the shot of elixir."

"Now, look here," Marc said sternly, "if you think . . ."

He stopped, for Hotstuff, a businessman of some agility, already had Marc's wallet in his hand and was counting out the money. Marc snatched it back from him.

"Here, now!" he said.

Harold grinned modestly. "Mother taught me how to take up public collections while I was still in rompers. They say I was the cutest little dip that ever work-

ed the Stem."

"Well, this is one stem you're not clipping," Marc said hotly. "Keep your hands to yourself."

"I ain't goin' to leave till I get paid," Hotstuff said without animosity.

"Just a minute," Toffee broke in. "While you two are arguing, time is running down the drain. If we're going to the country we'd better get started."

Marc turned to her with a sigh. "I thought I explained to you that . . ."

"But I've got it all figured out," Toffee said complacently. "While you've been wasting your time with this grifter, I've been working out a plan."

"I'm sorry," Marc said wearily "but I don't think I could stand another one of your plans. Not today."

"But this will work," Toffee said brightly. "Now the problem, to put it succinctly, is for me to go to the country, but not to be noticed by Julie. Well, actually, that's the easiest thing in the world."

"Oh?" Marc said. "If you imagine that Julie is likely to overlook a half-naked redhead . . ."

"Now, look at it this way," Toffee interrupted, "if you wanted to hide yourself where would be the best place?"

"Me," Hotstuff interjected, "I always go out and mix with the crowds when I'm on the dodge."

"Exactly!" Toffee said. She looked on Hotstuff with new respect, then, glancing back to Marc, pointed across the street. "See that bus?"

TLTING his glasses, Marc followed the direction of her pointing finger. Diagonally across the street was parked a large yellow sight-seeing bus of a vintage so distant as to defy memory. At the front of the bus stood a tall, cadaverous looking individual in shirt sleeves, about whom was an atmosphere of listless resignation. Inside the bus, the seats were starkly uninhabited.

"What we do," Toffee went on enthusiastically, "is hire that bus and fill it up with a lot of people. Then we drive out to the country, and when Julie sees this great gang knocking about the place she'll never pay any special attention to anyone in particular. She'll never notice me."

"That's ridiculous," Marc said. "In the first place I doubt I'd ever be able to hire the bus privately."

"From the looks of business," Hotstuff said, "you could probably have it for a song."

"Even so, Marc said doggedly, "we are not a crowd. We are only

two people, and I'm positive Julie is quite capable of picking a strange young lady out of a group of two."

"I'd be very happy to accompany you," Hotstuff said. "In fact I insist on it, so's I can protect my investment."

"There!" Toffee said. "We're forming a crowd already. All we need are about twenty more."

"And where are we going to get them?" Marc asked serenely.

"I could have a number of my business acquaintances and their—uh—molls—out here on the corner in a flash," Hotstuff offered obligingly. "I know a number of personalities who are quite hot to get out of town for various reasons."

"Go get them!" Toffee said. "We'll hire the bus while you're gone."

"Now, just a second . . ." Marc yelled, but Hotstuff had already scurried off down the street toward the corner poolhall.

THE deal for the bus was concluded in almost the same instant that Marc approached the gangling individual on the sidewalk.

"Sure, mister," the man said sadly. "Why not? A day in the country would suit me fine. You can have the bus and me for whatever you want to offer, and you

can bring along all the friends you want."

Marc fatefully handed over a couple of bills and glanced, not without apprehension, down the street. "The others should be along any moment now," he said. He turned to Toffee. "Just how are we going to explain all these people to Julie. We can't just say I asked them out for dinner."

"Well, then," Toffee said, "we'll just say you're a group of botany students on a field trip." As though that satisfactorily explained everything she started into the bus. "Heigh, ho! Oh, for a day of biology in the open air!"

"I thought you said botany," Marc said, uneasily.

"One can always hope," she said grandly.

True to his word, Hotstuff was back almost instantly, trailing after him a cast of characters the likes of which is rarely seen on the streets before sundown. The men, five of them in all, were heavy-browed and flashily dressed. Their female counterparts—or molls, as Hotstuff had described them—were so unanimous in their endorsement of low necklines, high heels, dyed hair and ankle bracelets that they seemed almost to be in uniform.

At the approach of this strange swarming, Marc lowered his glasses

only to replace them even a bit more quickly than was entirely necessary.

"Good Lord!" he groaned. "It looks like Saturday night at the police lineup."

At that moment, however, Hotstuff arrived at the front of the bus, his questionable companions crowding close behind him.

"These is some of my best chums," he announced with beaming pride. "I would introduce you to them only they don't like their names mentioned." He drew forward a crimson-lipped creature who had crossed the street close to his side.

"This is Floss, my mouse," he said.

Floss, whose hair ran the gamut of colors from jet at the roots to orange-red at the ends — with blond, brown and platinum intervening—gazed at Marc from beneath mascara-encrusted eyelashes.

"Hi, tallstuff," she said in a smoky tone, "ain't I seen you somewhere before?"

"Knock it off, Floss," Hotstuff said. "Today's vacation. Besides, the gent can't see you through those glasses, so don't waste your wattage." He grinned at Marc. "She likes you, man."

"I always like to improve public relations," Floss said delicately.

"I'm much obliged," Marc said,

edging away. "Well, I suppose we ought to be on our way."

"Okay, everybody!" Hotstuff yelled. "Climb aboard! We're off to mingle with nature!" He took Marc's arm and guided him to the steps. "Everybody brought a couple of bottles," he said. "All you have to do is supply the grub. Boy! is this going to be some party!"

"Yes," Marc said fatefully, "it probably is."

IT was not until the bus left the city and was churning its way into the fresh-budding atmosphere of the country that the little assemblage began to get into the true spirit of the trip.

Until then they had been content to sit quietly drinking from their bottles, but now, with the green fields and trees unfolding before them they were moved to song. Lifting their voices in shattering discord, they howled out a little number about an unfortunate heroine called Underslung Fannie whose amorous exploits, according to the lyrics, were distressingly uncanny. At the rear of the bus, Marc slunk in his seat and turned to Toffee.

"Leave it to you," he moaned. "How am I ever going to palm off this tight little segment of the underworld as a bunch of fun-loving botanists?"

"Oh, they're not so bad," Toffee said. "At least you don't have to worry about whether they're bad or not. You know they're bad right from the beginning."

"And so are you," Marc said dryly. "However, I suppose everyone seeks his own level. I might have expected this."

Toffee generously patted his cheek. "You're just overwrought," she said. "You need a drink." Reaching under her seat, she brought out the bottle of champagne. "Take some of this and you will see everything in a happy glow."

"Behind these glasses?" Marc asked.

"You may even find the nerve to take them off," Toffee said.

"In this crowd?" Marc said. "Heaven forbid!"

Nevertheless, after several lengthy drafts from the bottle, Marc did begin to see things more brightly, and he did remove his glasses. It gave the congregation before him a strange, bare-shouldered look, but the effect, since everyone was seated, was hardly shocking. He was careful, however, to keep his gaze averted from the passing landscape, particularly after a startling view of a pink-skinned, full-formed farmgirl scattering feed to a flock of hideously de-feathered chickens. After a time

he began to look on his new-found companions a bit more fondly.

"At least," he yawned, mellowed by the champagne and the warm sun, "they're a happy bunch of criminals."

As though to prove his words correct, the company suddenly roared with laughter, and Marc, content that things were going well, put his head back against the seat and dozed off.

The burst of laughter, however, had Marc listened more closely to it, was more a cause for alarm than complacency. In its gleeful, boisterous tones was the announcement that the drunken little band of miscreants had found still a new outlet for their antisocial tendencies.

A blowsy blonde named Dora, spotting a cop lounging against his motorcycle along the highway, had observed the prescribed amenities between the law and the underworld by leaning out the window and making a series of rude and meaningful gestures. Admiring Dora's finesse in this affair, her escort, a blue-jawed second-story artist named Moose, leaned out beside her and dispatched a depleted whiskey bottle at the cop's head, scoring a solid hit along side the ear. Their friends and companions, as a result, had fairly collapsed in their seats with helpless laughter.

IN this sordid incident were the beginnings of a well-routined game. The criminals, seeing no end of fun in this little sport, organized themselves into a team so that it might be pursued with the greatest efficiency and dispatch. Splitting themselves into cop-watchers, cop-insulters and cop-smackers, they became a yelling, yowling menace to every patrolman and peace-enforcer along the highway. As Marc continued to slumber, a chorus of sirens began to wail and shriek in the wake of the lumbering bus. Of those involved in this not-so-innocent diversion, only the bus driver was distressed.

"Now, cut it out, you!" he yelled back at his cop-assaulting passengers. "Layoff before you get me into serious trouble!"

"Step on the gas, you hacky!" Moose roared. "Give it the gun!" And having delivered this command, he snatched up another bottle and sent it sizzling through the window toward the head of an unsuspecting sheriff's deputy.

"Got him!" Floss shrieked with childish glee and collapsed to the aisle in a fit of giggles.

The sirens following the bus had reached a many-throated scream before Marc finally awoke. Opening his eyes with a start, he gazed about, firmly convinced that the world had gone mad. A glance to-

ward the front of the bus and another out the rear, however, swiftly told him the frightful truth of the matter.

"Stop that!" he yelled. "Stop it this instant!"

"Look, mister!" the bus driver hollered. "Either you quiet down those maniacs or I'm going to drive this bus right off a cliff somewhere!"

Marc looked ahead down the highway. Mercifully, deliverance, of a sort, was at hand.

"Just around the next bend!" he yelled. "Take the drive to the left!"

"Golly! Toffee cried happily, "isn't this exciting!"

Marc cast her a brief, scathing glance and concentrated on the road ahead. The bus, traveling at maximum speed, was rattling and creaking in every joint. Tires squealing, the driver took the turn ahead, then cut sharply to the left and through the gateway that bore the sign, 'Pillsworth Acres.'

The bus careened up the circle of the drive, spitting gravel and dirt from beneath its tires. A rambling, stone-faced house loomed rapidly ahead. Green, tree-studded lawns stretched away on all sides. Down the rise to the west a swimming pool flashed by, studing the greenness like a glimmering, intermittent sapphire. With

a scream of the brakes, the bus ground to a terrifying stop at the entrance to the house. In the distance, back on the highway, the avenging sirens grew louder, then faded swiftly away into the distance. The driver at the front of the bus went limp in his seat.

"All out!" he gritted. "Get the hell out of here before I go nuts!"

Marc whirled about to Toffee. "Why didn't you wake me up?" he demanded.

"What for?" Toffee asked blithely. "You'd only have worried. And everything turned out fine, didn't it?"

As the company of undesirables staggered, reeled and toppled from the bus onto the lawn, Marc and Toffee followed after. Marc refitted his glasses to his nose and paused before the driver's extended hand.

"Yes?" he asked.

"Look, buddy," the driver said, "where can I hide this hack? Those cops may be comin' back here any minute."

"Seems a shame to hide it," Marc said acidly, "when we've spent so many happy hours together in it."

"I gotta hide it, mister," the driver said. "I don't want to get into any trouble. You see, this ain't my bus."

"What?" Marc said.

THE driver shook his head woefully. "I was just standing there when you came along and offered to hire it. The guy who owns it was in a java joint down the street. I just got fired off my job this morning, and when you came along and made me that offer, well, it was such a beautiful day and all . . ."

"You, too!" Marc said, aghast. "Isn't anybody legitimate today?"

"I still think I ought to hide this can."

"Hide it by all means!" Marc agreed. "Remove all trace of it." He motioned toward the woods. "Drive it out there, where it will never be seen again."

Hotstuff, who had overheard this exchange, moved in confidentially. "Me and my pals are experts at obscurin' the evidence," he offered. "We could convert it into an icebox, so's they'd never know the difference."

The driver shook his head. "I think the woods are better," he said. He sighed. "Besides, I want to be off by myself for a while, where I can take a nap."

Toffee held out the bottle of champagne which was still half full. "Take this with you," she said. "You need it."

"I sure do, lady," the driver said gratefully, accepting the bottle. "I need every drop of it. I'm going

to get so drunk I won't even know who I am."

At this point Mr. Busby, Marc's paunchy, genteel caretaker, tottered curiously down the steps and approached the bus with evident caution.

"'Afternoon, Mr. Pillsworth,'" he said uncertainly. "I see you brought along some—uh—guests."

"Why, yes, Busby," Marc said, with an attempt at nonchalance. "I brought them up for a little outing. A group of business associates and their wives."

At this description, Floss straightened her skirt and put a hand to her hair. Hotstuff removed his hand gracefully from a companion's pocket and smiled ingratiatingly.

"I see," Busby said quietly, but in his pale eyes there was an enormous doubt.

"Where is Mrs. Pillsworth?" Marc asked casually. "And Mario?"

"I'm not just certain," Busby said. "They took their paints and a lunch hamper and went off into the woods." He pointed to the south. "They were headed out that way."

"I think I'll hunt them out and have a word with them," Marc said.

"And your—uh—associates?"

"Oh, yes," Marc said. He leaned a bit closer to Busby. "What do you think would amuse them,

Busby?"

"I don't suppose I should say it, sir," Busby said, "but I think I ought to slip inside and put the silver and Mrs. Pillsworth's jewels in the vault. As for amusing them, we haven't any dope or revolvers on the premises, but, then, perhaps they've brought their own."

"I shouldn't be surprised," Marc said.

"And while I'm about it, sir," Busby went on, "I think I'd better put the lock on the wine cellar."

"Wine cellar!"

It was Hotstuff, the ever-present eavesdropper, who spoke up. "Hey, gang, there's a wine cellar!" he announced. "Cool, huh?"

"Say," Floss drawled, sidling up to Marc. "you've really got class, huh? A wine cellar is right up my alley. The lower I get the better I like it."

TOFFEE stepped forward, eyes glittering. "You may get lower than you care to, doll, if you keep on like that. You may find yourself six feet under with a very dim out-look."

"Listen, sister," Floss said belligerently, "I'll tangle with you any time."

"You may never get untangled if you do," Toffee flared. "You may wind up wearing that fright wig of yours on your bustle!"

"I'll risk it, carrot-top!"

"There's no risk involved," Toffee said, doubling her fists. "I'll make you a money-back guarantee!"

"Well, well," Hotstuff said approvingly, "the girls are getting real well acquainted, ain't they?"

"Too well," Marc said. "We'd better separate them before they get downright intimate." He turned to Busby. "Show the guests to the wine cellar."

"But, sir . . ."

"I know, Busby," Marc said, "but they'll probably be quiet there—at least for a while."

"I suppose so, sir," Busby said dully. He started back toward the house, and the raucous little band fell in behind him. As they departed, Toffee stared after Floss malevolently.

"I may belt that kid one yet," she murmured.

Behind them, the bus started up, lurched crazily forward, shot through the hedge bordering the drive and took off drunkenly across the lawn and into the trees.

"Oh well," Marc sighed. "I suppose it might be worse—though I can't imagine how."

"Devastation seems to be prevalent today," Toffee agreed.

"And with you helping it along," Marc said, "I seem to have gotten a double order." Lifting his glasses

briefly, he stared off toward the woods. "I suppose I'd better get going. The sooner I settle things the better."

"If you want my advice," Toffee said, "take a gun."

"What in the world would I do with a gun?" Marc asked.

"It would give weight to your argument," Toffee said. "These Latin lovers expect jealous husbands to carry guns."

"I am not jealous," Marc said stiffly, "I'm just worried, that's all."

"In that case," Toffee said, "why don't we just wait here until they get back? We could join the party in the cellar."

"It's this springtime daffiness that really upsets me," Marc said. "Everyone seems out of control."

"Look," Toffee said, "if they went to the woods in that direction, why don't we go to them in the other direction and let Julie do the worrying for a change. Fair's fair, isn't it?"

"How could that possibly worry Julie," Marc asked. "She wouldn't even know we were there."

"That's right," Toffee said evilly, "she wouldn't, would she?"

"Unprincipled little trollop," Marc said.

"Unprincipled to the bone," Toffee agreed. She sighed. "But what good does it do me?"

"I suppose I should drop in on my guests before I leave," Marc said, "just to make sure they're comfortable."

"They're probably so comfortable by now, they're unconscious."

"They're better that way," Marc said.

This settled, he turned away, then turned quickly back again as Busby, wringing his hands with desperation, suddenly flew through the door and down the steps.

"Sir! Sir!" he yelled. "They've done it already, sir! I can't imagine . . . They must be quick as cats!"

"What are you talking about, Busby?" Marc asked.

"The silver, sir!" Busby wailed. "And Mrs. Pillsworth's jewels! Your—associates cleaned out the lot! And they merely passed through the house, sir!"

"Like corn through a goose," Toffee murmured.

"Oh, Mrs. Pillsworth will be furious, sir!" Busby lamented. "Mrs. Pillsworth puts great store by her silver and jewels!"

MARC shuddered with apprehension. Julie would be more than furious; she would be livid. And, worse than that, she would be livid at him! Since the pack of thieves who had taken the things were his guests, the whole thing,

therefore, would be all his fault. She would never forgive him.

"We'll have to get them back!" he said.

"I could call the police, sir!"

"No!" Marc fairly yelled. "No, Busby, don't call the police." He frowned concernedly. "Are they all down in the cellar now?"

"Revelling," Busby said hauntingly. "Revelling and shouting and guzzling. I don't think I'd go down there if I were you. It's a regular den of vice."

"Nevertheless," Marc said, "they need a good talking to. It's hardly good manners to accept a man's hospitality and steal his wife's jewels."

"It was probably Floss," Toffee said vengefully. "She's got her eye out for a good thing, all right."

Together, the three of them entered the house, crossed the wide, cool hall at the front, passed through the solarium and kitchen and drew up at the doorway that led down to the cellar. The sound of coarse laughter momentarily halted their steps. From inside his jacket, Busby extracted a revolver.

"Perhaps you should have this, sir," he said. "I keep it for emergencies."

"And this is certainly an emergency," Marc said. Taking the gun, he faced the stairway. "I will speak to them firmly and if that

doesn't work, I'll—I'll—

"Call the police, sir?"

"No! No, I'll—I'll hope for the best."

"With that mob," Busby said dismally, "the best is bound to be something worse than the worst, if you get my meaning."

"Nevertheless," Marc said, "we will have to face them with it." He led the way through the door and down the step into the dim, musty sweetness of the cellar. As they descended, a second roar of laughter rose to greet them.

"Hey!" a voice called roughly out of the shadows. "Mine host approaches—with vassals?"

"Vassals of what?" another voice inquired woozily. "Or do you mean sea-going vassals?"

Marc peered into the dimness and held up a hand. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, not without a note of irony. "Ladies and gentlemen, Busby, here, has just told me a most shocking story."

There was a stirring in the dark. "Old Busby did that?" a voice said interestedly. "He hardly looks like he'd know any shockin' stories."

"Shame on Busby!" a feminine voice giggled out of the distance.

A form moved out of the shadows and proved to be Floss. "Let's hear this shockin' story," she said eagerly. "Ain't nothin' like a good

shockin' story to get the party goin'."

Marc put up his hand again. "No," he said, "you don't understand; it's not that kind of a shocking story."

"A true confession, huh?" a voice said sullenly from behind the wine bins. "Don't sign it, Busby. Get a good shyster before you put your name to it."

"Please!" Marc said. "Let me tell you . . ."

"Not if it makes us accessories to the fact!" the voice came back. "I don't want to hear it. I'm putting my fingers in my ears!"

"Let's all put our fingers in our ears!" a blonde-sounding voice tittered. "It tickles!"

"Now, just a minute!" Marc yelled. "Listen! Someone here has stolen the silver and my wife's jewels, and I've got to have them back. The only thing I can do is appeal to you as a friend."

"You'd appeal to me even as an enemy," Floss giggled tipsily. "Advance, friend and be recognized."

"If he does," Toffee snarled, "he'll also be cauterized. Stay back, you two-bit lollypop!"

But Marc was not to be distracted from the matter at hand. "Now, which one of you did it?" he asked. "There won't be any arrest if you will just return the things."

THERE was a dense silence. Hotstuff shuffled out of the dimness and took up his place unsteadily at Marc's side.

"Okay, you crazy cats!" he hollered. "Which one of you pinched Mrs. Pillsworth's rocks?"

"Was she wearin' them at the time?" a female voice inquired.

"No, she wasn't," Marc said. "What has that got to do with it?"

"Plenty," the voice said. "If she was wearin' them there might have been a hell of a lot more pinched than just her jewelry." The speaker sighed with understanding. "Sometimes a girl likes to be pinched just for herself alone."

"You're gonna get slugged just for yourself alone if you don't shut up," Hotstuff snapped. He paused significantly. "Ain't no one gonna sing?" He turned back to Marc. "Was the stuff insured?"

"Yes," Marc said, "but it's not as simple as that." Resignedly, he launched into the story of his domestic problems. "So, you see," he concluded imploringly, "I have to have the original jewels back or I might lose my wife."

"And she's out two-timin' you with this Mario creep?" a voice said indignantly. "Disgustin'!"

"You gotta take your rod and blast the guy," another voice said hotly. "Defendin' your home, you could get off scot free."

"Hey!" Hotstuff broke in suddenly, "I got a great idea!" He grinned at his unseen audience with triumph. "Here we are, enjoyin' a healthful, restful day in the country, all at Mr. Pillsworth's expense. Well, now, don't it seem like we owe him some kind of token of thanks?"

"Yeah!" Floss said happily. "Like an ash tray made like a toilet seat!"

"Naw, Floss, nothin' like that," Hotstuff frowned. "What I mean is something real useful that he needs."

"Yeah?" a voice asked eagerly. "Like what?"

"Well, now I was thinkin'" Hotstuff said, "what Pillsworth, here needs most is to have this Mario removed outa the way. Naturally, he can't go knock the guy off himself; he just ain't the type. So, what I got the idea for, is why don't we do the job for him? Kind of like a thank-you present because we're havin' such a nice time!"

"Hey!" a voice growled enthusiastically, "that's a solid idea. It's got a lot of sentiment, too. Like one good turn deserves another."

There was a general murmur of assent.

"After all," the blond-sounding voice said suddenly, "what are friends for, except to go around and help out one another?" There

was the sound of loud snuffling. "It kind of gets you when you stop and think about it. Who's got a rod that ain't hot?"

"Now, wait a minute!" Marc yelled. "You can't do that! It's murder!"

"But we gotta make up for the jewels, don't we?" Hotstuff said. "We gotta be honest with you, don't we?"

Already, the murderous drunks had begun to swarm out of the dimness. The blue-jawed Moose appeared brandishing a wicked looking .38.

"We'll all take shots at him," he chuckled, "and say it was a huntin' accident. That way, they won't be able to pin it on no one in particular."

"Now, listen!" Marc rasped desperately. "I can't permit you to do this!"

"Oh, it's really nothin'," Hotstuff said modestly. He motioned to his followers. "Come on, friends, to the woods!"

"You mustn't do this!" Marc cried.

"What a guy!" Moose growled admiringly. "You gotta practically fight him to even do him a little favor."

THE band swarmed past Marc and up the steps. "We'll spread out and force him into the

open!" Hotstuff yelled.

"Stop!" Marc hollered. "Don't do it! I don't want you to!"

But the last of the assassins reached the top of the steps and disappeared out the door. Marc turned hopelessly to Toffee.

"I should have stayed in jail!" he said. "I can just see the newspapers when all this is over. Julie will divorce me for certain!"

"Well, don't just stand there wringing your hands," Toffee said. "Let's go out and warn them. We'll have to hide this Mario character until they've cooled down and gone away."

"I suppose so," Marc said. He turned and, with Toffee's guidance, started up the steps. "At least we know where to look. Maybe we can beat them to it."

They hurried up the stairs and out the back door. Marc turned briefly back to Busby.

"You stay here," he said. "If Mrs. Pillsworth and Mario return warn them to stay out of sight."

"Yes, sir," Busby said. "And I think I'll stay out of sight myself."

Marc and Toffee started out.

"They're probably down along the stream somewhere," Marc said. "Let's hurry."

It was when they had reached the end of the lawns and were starting into the brush that Marc

stumbled and lost his glasses. After looking about them then, hurriedly, he gave them up.

"I'll just have to do without them," he said.

"This is hardly the time to indulge your Puritan sensitivities," Toffee agreed. "Come on!"

They forged ahead over rocks and through bushes until they came to the edge of the stream. There they stopped, scanning the banks for as far as they could see, but there was no one.

"You go in that direction," Toffee said quickly, "And I'll go upstream. If I find them I'll whistle."

Marc nodded agreement and struck out, shoving his way through a thick tangle of foliage. He moved along carefully toward a clearing that he remembered to be ahead. Finally, starting through the last leafy barrier, he caught his coat on a branch. He turned back to loosen it, at the same time backing out into the opening, pulling against the hold of the branch. The gun in his hand, however, made the maneuver awkward. As the coat finally came loose, he fell backwards, landing on the grass.

He was just starting to boost himself up, when he heard the scream behind him. It was a shrill scream and filled with horror. There was an ensuing moment of silence,

then the sound of swiftly padding feet, scurrying in all directions. Marc turned and looked.

At first glance he was deeply startled, having forgotten momentarily the condition of his eyes. A large collection of humanity, glistening pinkly in the afternoon sunlight, were disappearing frenziedly into the surrounding greenery. As their unclad backsides vanished behind cover, Marc noticed that they had left behind them a number of picnic baskets, thermos jugs and blankets.

He sat for a moment, getting back his breath, then, on brief reflection, it came to him that these picnickers, whoever they were, had behaved with singular strangeness. Why should they run so desperately for cover just because he had fallen into the clearing?

He had only begun to ponder this curious equation when he realized that perhaps his falling there really had nothing to do with it at all. Perhaps something else, something much more formidable than a mere intruder, had panicked them. Visions of man-consuming cobras and slavering tigers flashed through his mind. Whatever it was that had so upset these people, he wasn't going to hang around to welcome it single-handedly. Leaping to his feet, he also ran for cover.

HE crashed through the scratchy frontier of brush and came to an abrupt stop. Crouching before him, her back fortunately turned, was a plumpish, dark-haired woman, hiding her face in her hands. Marc crouched quickly down beside her and for a moment there was a tense silence. It was as though they waited for a bomb to drop. As the moments passed, however, and nothing occurred, Marc cleared his throat. The woman flinched nervously.

"Shh!" she hissed. "Be quiet!"

"What for?" Marc asked. "What happened?"

"Didn't you see?" the woman asked.

"I must have missed it," Marc said.

"Well, just be quiet," the woman said again, and once more the silence returned.

Finally, out of sheer curiosity, Marc was forced to reopen the conversation.

"This seems to be my day for crouching down with women," he said, trying a social tone.

"Is it?" the woman said. "I suppose there's a reason why?"

"I don't know," Marc said, feeling that this exchange was not destined to make a great deal of sense. "But I'm beginning to be just a little stiff from it."

"From what?" the woman asked

absently.

"From crouching down with women," Marc said, wishing he hadn't started the discussion in the first place.

"Do you mean you get stiffer from crouching down with women than with men?" the woman asked.

"Well, I don't know about that," Marc said. "I've never crouched down with any men. Do you suppose it would matter if I stood up and stretched a bit?"

"For heaven's sake!" the woman gasped. "Do you want to be seen?"

"Why shouldn't I be seen?" Marc asked.

"You know very well," the woman said, "the way you are."

"The way I am?"

"Certainly," the woman said. "You know how people get about that sort of thing."

"Oh?" Marc said, completely lost. "Say, how am I, anyway?"

"How should I know how you are?" the woman said primly. I don't allow myself to think about those things."

"But you were just talking about it," Marc said, "and about how people get about it."

"Your mind should be above it all," the woman said. "If you're asking for compliments, you've come to the wrong party."

"I persistently get the feeling," Marc said, "that we're talking

about two different things."

"Weren't you at the last meeting when the citizen's committee showed up and started chasing us around?"

"Why no," Marc said interestedly, "I guess I missed that one."

"The way people act," the woman said peeishly, "you'd think we nudists aren't decent or something."

"*Nudists!*" Marc yelped. "Then, you really haven't any clothes on after all!"

"Of course I haven't," the woman said selfrighteously. "And you . . . Suddenly a quiver of realization coursed through her plump body and, removing her hands from her eyes, she looked around at Marc with a glance of horror. Her lips parted and she screamed.

"You're dressed!" she cried. "You're the man with the gun! Get away from me. Don't come near me!"

"I wouldn't think of it!" Marc said, leaping to his feet. "Good heavens, don't turn around!"

"Don't worry," the woman said fervently, "I don't think I could even if I wanted to! I'm just going to sit here and yell." And just to prove it, apparently, she screamed again. "He's here!" she shrieked. "He's here, with all his clothes on!" Her tone implied a

nasty accusation.

"Good grief!" Marc said. "You don't have to tell everybody, do you?"

NOW that the alarm was out, the landscape came madly to life. Nudes of all sizes and descriptions, clutching bits of greenery to themselves where it was most needed, began leaping about through the brush like fish in a net.

Swiftly it developed into a full-blown stampede. Marc goggled with disbelief as tanned figures rushed across the clearing and flashed out of sight along the banks of the stream.

"Well, I'll be darned!" Marc breathed and glanced down at the leavings of the picnic. He shrugged and started on, hoping fervently that he wouldn't overtake them again. With his eyes behaving so strangely everything became so fraught with complexities. When, for instance, was a nude not a nude?

MEANWHILE, in another clearing just a bit farther along, Julie, her blonde hair glinting golden in the sunshine, sat in a leafy bower with her wide yellow skirts spread artfully about her long, aristocratic legs. The hypnotic whisper of the stream was in

her ears and the spell of the first day of spring was in her blue eyes. From beneath drowsily lowered lids, she watched Mario as he arranged his canvas and paints and then, looking up, came toward her.

"The neck of the blouse, Madonna mia," he said, "it needs to be just a trifle lower so as to display more of the—uh—shoulder." He reached out a slender hand. "May I?"

Julie looked up, and for a moment her eyes met his. She glanced quickly away, wondering what in the world was coming over her; she had never felt this odd melting sensation before. Inwardly, she gave herself a little shake, as a reminder that she was not a predatory creature of impulse, no matter how much she felt like one. Then Mario's hand touched her shoulder and she shivered. For just that one instant it was as though Marc had never existed; the spell of the spring was too strong.

"Mario! she breathed.

"Madonna!" Mario whispered fervently, dropping to her side. "You are exquisite! You are like a rare jewel in the sunlight!" And his arm moved practicedly toward her shoulder.

Their eyes met, and for a moment the tableau of romantic danger held, suspended in time, it seemed. Then it shattered as the

greenery suddenly parted around them and a host of naked figures, desperately clutching bunches of leaves to themselves, flooded into the clearing. Julie looked up frightenedly and screamed.

"Good heavens!" she cried.

The undraped stampeder stopped short. There was an interval of stunned silence, then the leafy interlopers, seized with a fit of modesty, hastily huddled together and crouched down.

"My God!" a small round-eyed man gasped. "We're surrounded. Everybody's wearing clothes to-day."

"Everywhere you look," said a tousled-looking blond, "there's concealment!"

The silence returned, more awkwardly this time. The nudists stared worriedly at Julie and Mario and they, too stunned for words, stared back. Julie, from sheer nervousness, finally spoke.

"You—you haven't any clothes on!" she observed rather foolishly.

"We are aware of that, madam," a bald-pated gentleman said miserably. "And we're growing more aware of it every minute. You don't have to tell us."

"Don't you even care?" Julie asked shakely. "Don't you *want* to have any on?"

"No, we don't" the first man said defiantly. "We feel that for

the sake of our health—and morals, too—we shouldn't have."

"It may be wonderful for your health," Julie said doubtfully, "but I can't think it would do much for your morals."

"That's because you don't understand," a woman snapped. "You're not a right-thinker."

"Well, it hardly matters now whether I understand or not," Julie said. "Are you going to go on like that indefinitely?"

"Not wearing clothes?" the man asked.

"No," Julie said. "Crouching there, I mean, staring around. You are making me terribly uncomfortable."

"If we stood up," a skinny man said, "we'd make you a lot more uncomfortable."

"Yes," Julie agreed quickly. "I suppose you would. Still, we can't just all sit here like this, can we?"

"I don't know about you, lady," the skinny man said, "But I'd rather not."

"Then, what will we do?" Julie said. "If we close our eyes will you promise to go away — very quietly."

"But where will we go?" the man asked. "The woods are alive with non-nudists today. We hardly know which way to turn."

"You should have thought of that before you took your clothes

off," Julie said edgily.

AT the far end of the clearing there was a dry parting of the bushes and Marc ambled into range. His gaze went no farther than the nearest nudist and, despite the gun, he put his hands over his eyes.

"Marc!" Julie cried.

At the sound of Julie's voice Marc's face drained of all color. The worst had happened, just as he had suspected. Under Mario's degrading influence, Julie had not only gone astray, she had even joined the nudists.

"Julie!" he cried forlornly. "How could you do a thing like this?"

"A thing like what?" Julie asked, getting to her feet. "What are you talking about?"

"Running around—like that!" Marc said.

"I'm not running around," Julie said, inching her neckline up guiltily. "Why are you holding your hands over your eyes like that? And what are you doing with that gun?"

"I can't bear to look," Marc said. "I may shoot myself."

"What!" Julie said, then smiled. "Oh, it's all this bare skin that upsets you, eh?"

Marc winced anew. "Doesn't it bother you?" he asked.

"You'll never know how much,"

Julie said, "but they say it's good for the health and the morals."

"Morals!" Marc said. "I'm surprised you even know the word any longer. I think I'd better leave."

"Well, if I can face all this, surely you can, too," Julie said. "You still haven't explained what you're doing with that gun."

The skinny nude gentleman stirred anxiously. "Are you people going to go on chatting all day?" he asked plaintively. "My leaves are beginning to wilt."

"Your leaves," Julie said tartly, "are no concern of ours."

"If they droop just a little bit farther they'll be everybody's concern," the man said wanly.

"Yes, they certainly will," Marc shuddered. He turned in Julie's direction. "I hope your leaves are holding up all right."

"I don't have any leaves," Julie said. "Why should I have? Why are you acting so strange?"

Marc started forward. As he did so, he caught his toe on a projecting root and stumbled. Lurching forward, he threw out his hand blindly and inadvertently pulled the trigger of the gun. There was a deafening report and a bullet sailed into the air. Julie, clutching at Mario's arm screamed at the top of her lungs.

"He's trying to kill us!" she yelled. "Run, Mario, run!"

Mario hardly needed the invitation; even before it was completed, he had begun to put his feet into motion. Dragging Julie after him, he crashed into the brush, and the two of them disappeared from sight.

"Julie!" Marc said brokenly. He opened his eyes and looked in the direction of their departure. He glanced back at the nudists. "I hope you're satisfied!"

"We're not, mister," the skinny man wailed. "We can't hold onto these leaves forever. What will we do then?"

"I wouldn't be surprised at anything," Marc said nastily, "not from a gang like you."

Like a belated echo in the distance, there was the sound of a loud report from the direction in which Julie and Mario had departed.

"Good Lord!" Marc said, leaping forward. "I forgot!" He started toward the bushes just in time to collide with Toffee who darted suddenly into the open.

"They're after them!" Toffee cried. "They heard your shot and closed in!" There was the sound of two more shots. Marc started forward, but Toffee held him back.

"Don't go out there!" she cried. "They're in a mood to shoot anything that moves!"

"But if they kill Mario, Julie

will swear I did it!" Marc said. "I've got to stop them!"

SUDDENLY the air rattled with gunfire, this time closer at hand. In the quiet that followed there was the sound of swiftly approaching footsteps. An instant later, Moose crashed into the clearing and jounced to a stop against Marc's chest.

"Get outa the way, you civilian!" the thug yelled blindly. "The joint is swarmin' with bulls!"

Marc had only barely digested this frenzied bulletin when Floss, Hotstuff, the blousy blonde and the other assorted criminals hurled drunkenly through the opening.

"Cops everywhere!" Hotstuff wailed. He fixed Marc with a cold eye. "Who tipped 'em off, huh?"

"I didn't," Marc said. "Where are they?"

"Fannin' out!" Floss whined. "Closin' in!"

"Both at the same time?" Toffee asked curiously.

"Well, I suppose its better than murder," Marc said hopelessly.

During this exchange, the fugitives had collected themselves enough to be aware of the nudists, who, rising, were clutching their greenery to them with trembling fright.

"Holy gee!" Floss said. "Will

you look at them! What's goin' on here, an open air smoker?"

"We do it for our health," the plump woman said defensively.

"That's a new angle," Floss said interestedly.

"The police!" the skinny man moaned, unaware of Floss' roving eye. "They'll arrest us!"

"Boy," Floss said evilly, "what a place for a pair of prunin' shears!"

"Floss!" Hotstuff said severely. "This is no time for fun. The cops will be swarmin' all over us in a minute!"

"Are we just going to stand here and let them arrest us?" Toffee said.

"We're surrounded," Moose said. "We'll have to shoot our way out."

"No!" Marc yelled. "Absolutely no more shooting!"

"We nudists," the skinny man announced quaveringly, "refuse to have any part in all this."

"You shut up!" Moose snarled. The sound of a wailing siren approached from the distance. "Good God, they're on wheels now! They've got us out-pointed."

There was a general nervous shuffling as the assembled law-offenders moved forward to view their oncoming fate. The movement was suddenly arrested, however, as a roaring sound, accom-

panied by the snap and crunch of despoiled underbrush, echoed near at hand.

"Holy smoke!" Marc cried, "they're sending in tanks!"

"Everybody grab something!" Floss said hysterically. "A lady must defend herself to the end!"

"And then what?" Toffee inquired bitterly.

Already, the trees and bushes at the end of the clearing were starting to thrash about with frenzied agitation. A tree crashed to earth and, plowing over it, in a veering rush, came the yellow sight-seeing bus. The driver, markedly foggy of eye, leaned his head out the window.

"The cops!" he yelled. "They're after me! They've been chasing me to hell and gone all over the place!" With a great grinding of brakes, the bus jolted to a stop. "I gotta get outa here!" He peered down at Marc. "Which way do I go, mister?"

"Hey, wait!" Toffee said. "We've all got to get out of here!" She ran around to the door of the bus. "Open up!"

There was a crush of humanity as nudists and thugs alike struggled to climb into the palpitating bus.

"Snap into it!" the driver barked. "They're comin' in droves, those cops, and they're all sore as hell!"

MARC and Toffee stumbled to the rear of the bus and dropped into adjoining seats.

"At least we've got a running start," Toffee said breathlessly.

"Toward what, though?" Marc asked dismally. "The law thinks I'm an undesirable and my wife thinks I'm a homicidal maniac. Have I thanked you sufficiently for your wonderful help in this affair?"

"At least I tried," Toffee said. "You might show a little gratitude for that."

But Marc wasn't listening. He was gaping at the others as they climbed aboard and fell into their seats up ahead.

"My gosh!" he breathed.

"What is it?" Toffee asked.

"In all this excitement—and with all those nudists around—I didn't notice."

"Notice what?"

"The elixir is wearing off. Now, everybody's in their underwear! Except the nudists, of course."

"Well, at least," Toffee sighed, "you can keep your eyes open now."

"I'm not so sure," Marc said. "You should see Hotstuff's underwear—begonias on a field of purple."

"No!" Toffee said delightedly. "I suppose even he has his poetic side."

The conversation stopped short

as the bus leaped ahead, throwing the passengers back in their seats.

"We'll try to circle around them!" the driver called out. "Hang on!"

There was a crash as the bus lunged back into the foliage. Branches lashed frenetically at the windows and skittered back into the distance. There was a communal scream as a large oak loomed before the windshield, but the driver, pulling frantically at the wheel, managed to send the bus swerving around it. Presently, the leaping, bucking vehicle fought its way clear of the wilds and emerged onto the green expanse of the lawns.

It all happened too quickly for any of the participants to have a very clear view of exactly what happened. One thing, though, was woefully evident; the driver had gotten mixed up in his directions. As they quitted the undergrowth, they suddenly found themselves in a head-on rush toward the charging ranks of the law. All at once the landscape was fairly littered with scrambling, dissembling cops. A siren shrieked with mechanical outrage.

"Give it the gas!" the passengers yelled. "Give it hell!"

The driver reacted automatically and pressed his foot down on the gas with everything he had. The

bus shot ahead, wildly out of control, and headed into a zig-zag course toward the house. In the path there suddenly loomed a pair of distracted figures who, at the sound of the churning bus, looked back and instantly froze in their tracks.

"Julie!" Marc screamed, leaping from his seat and fighting his way to a position beside the driver. "Julie! Run!"

Outside, Julie merely covered her face with her hands. "Oh, Lord!" she wailed. "Now he's after us with a bus!"

At the last second Marc grabbed the wheel from the driver and yanked at it furiously. The bus careened to one side as Julie and Mario leaped or fainted to the grass, out of the way. The bus roared on, while in the background the siren hurled its piercing tone to the sky. Somewhere in the distance a voice barked hoarsely.

"Fire!" it bellowed. "Get 'em in the tires! That bus is packed with lunatics!"

There was an instantaneous volley of gunfire and suddenly the bus skittered to one side, teetered precariously on two wheels, then righted itself and plunged dead-on into the substantial trunk of a weeping willow. There was a thunderous crash, a rising chorus of terrified voices and then silence.

By fighting her way through the mass of struggling bodies in the aisle, Toffee managed to reach Marc's prone figure. She dropped down beside him and drew his head gently into her lap.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

Marc opened his eyes and looked at her mistily. "I think so," he said. "I feel so drowsy, though." Then suddenly he frowned.

"What is it?" Toffee asked quickly.

"Julie . . . Marc said.

"Julie? What about her?"

"She wasn't with the nudists after all," Marc murmured. "I mean she wasn't one of them."

"Well, what's so bad about that?"

Marc sighed unhappily. "She's wearing pink lace underwear!" he said. "And she's never worn it before." With that, as though the thought were too much for him, he closed his eyes and went limp in her arms.

Toffee, like a drifting, though shapely, cloud of smoke, faded rapidly into thin air.

"Jeez!" breathed a cop who had reached the door of the bus just in time to witness this phenomenon. "This gang is even creepier than we thought!"

JUDGE Frennish plainly boggled at the sight that greeted

his astonished eyes as he ascended the bench.

The defendants had split themselves into definite factions. At one side of the court the nudists had huddled together in a tight little protective unit, while the thugs and their dolls had disdainfully withdrawn to the other side. Marc, still in a state of slumber, had been casually deposited in a chair, mid-distant between the two groups.

Briefly, the judge studied these separate crime camps and turned a disillusioned gaze toward Sergeant Feeney who had reluctantly accompanied him to the bench.

"Good grief, Feeney," he said, "do you mean to say you picked up this gang all in one place?"

"All in one place," Sergeant Feeney nodded wearily.

"Good Lord!"

"Definitely, your honor," Sergeant Feeney agreed. "The ones without any clothes claim they were havin' a picnic."

"I'll just bet they were," the judge said. "Though I shouldn't think they'd care to be so frank about it." He sighed tremulously. "And the others? I see many familiar and loathsome faces there."

"They explained that they were botany students out for a field day. They're still quite drunk, your honor."

"Isn't that Hotstuff Harold there in the middle?"

"Yes, your honor," Sergeant Feeney said thinly, "he insists he's the head of the class."

"Quite a haul," the judge said. "I only wish they'd haul them somewhere else. What about that tall fellow there who seems to be asleep? Is he the one who was turned in earlier on the morals charge?"

"Yes, your honor. There's nothin' rightly wrong with him, accordin' to the doctor. Either he's shammin' or he's been takin' dope."

"A nasty business, Feeney," the judge commented sourly. He glanced around the room as though hoping to find some unexpected avenue of escape, then shrugged. "I suppose I might as well plunge in." Picking up the gavel, he banged it heavily on the bench. The defendants and the spectators looked up apprehensively.

"The court will come to order!" the judge announced, a severe look coming into his dark eyes. "It had darned well better, anyway." He fixed the nudists with a steely glance. "Is there a spokesman for this shameless group over here?"

The skinny man edged forward, clutching his badly drooping leaves. He flushed embarrassedly.

"I suppose I am, your honor," he said weakly.

The judge eyed him without pleasure. "Why are you crouched down like that? Got a bellyache?"

"No, sir," the skinny man said. "It's just that I can't stand up—the way my leaves are. It wouldn't look right."

"It doesn't look right now," the judge said tersely. "It looks perfectly dreadful."

The skinny man flushed a still deeper shade of red and agitated his leaves. "I'm sorry, your honor."

"It's too late to be sorry," the judge said. "Now, suppose you just tell me what you people were doing, running around indecently exposed."

"Well, your honor," the skinny man said hopefully, "we were having a picnic."

THE judge blanched a mottled grey. "So I've heard," he said. "There's no need to be defiant about it, you know."

"It was all very nice and orderly," the man offered, "until Mr. Pillsworth showed up."

"And then it got disorderly?"

"Everything got completely out of hand."

The judge's gaze swiveled toward Marc with gloomy speculation. "This fellow Pillsworth must exert a powerful influence everywhere he goes," he said. He turned back to the nudist.

"Just how out of hand did everything get, would you say?"

"I don't know exactly," the skinny man said. "Everyone was leaping about and running. It got pretty hard to follow. I don't think there were any broken bones, though."

"Broken bones!" the judge wheezed. He closed his eyes, as though to blot out a vision too awful for observation. When he opened them again, they were fixed on Hotstuff Harold.

"And how did you and your disreputable friends get mixed up in this?" he asked malevolently.

"We weren't mixed up in it," Hotstuff Harold said innocently. "We didn't know anything about these nudists until close to the end. We were very shocked at them."

"I dare say," the judge said dryly. "And may I ask, since you were out merely sniffing the flowers, how you all happened to be armed with guns?"

"Well," Hotstuff said vaguely, "we botanists can't be too careful, you know. There might be snakes."

"There *are* snakes," the judge said evenly, "and this courtroom is fairly crawling with them. Don't tell me that you were shooting up the countryside just to be on the safe side. Don't tell me that!"

"No, sir," Hotstuff said sullen-

ly. "I was goin' to, but I won't."

Floss stepped forward, her hair in wild disarray. "Look, your honor," she said, "I guess we might as well come clean. We was only out doin' a little job for Pillsworth."

"What!" the judge said. "You mean to say this Pillsworth commissioned you to do murder for him?"

"Well, not exactly murder," Floss said ingeniously. "We was just arrangin' a little accident—outa gratitude."

"This Pillsworth is a veritable fiend!" the judge said hollowly. "He's even managed to corrupt the underworld!" He glanced around the room. "Where's this bus thief I've heard about?"

The disconsolate driver shuffled forward. "That's me, I guess," he said.

The judge studied the man pettishly. "You admit stealing this bus?"

"I guess I did steal it," the driver said, "if you want to be technical about it."

"And I do," the judge said. "Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

"Well," the driver reflected, "I didn't exactly steal it with malice aforethought. That is I wasn't even thinking about stealing it until Pillsworth came along and asked

me about it."

"Don't tell me this Pillsworth persuaded you to take the bus?"

"Well, the money was quite an inducement."

FOR a moment, the judge appeared to brood into space, then, decisively, he turned to Sergeant Feeney.

"Wake this Pillsworth monster up," he said.

"Yes, your honor," the sergeant said and advanced toward Marc.

"I'll help," Floss said, joining him. "I'll loosen his tie."

"Thanks, miss," the sergeant said. "And I'll rub his wrists."

The court became quiet with speculation as Floss and the sergeant labored to arouse Marc. The stillness was soon shattered, however, as the door at the rear flew open and Julie, followed by Mario, flew down the aisle, her eyes ablaze.

"Stop!" she yelled. "Stop everything!"

"Madam! the judge said, "the court is in session!"

"That's just fine," Julie said. She looked around wildly. "Where is he? Have you got him under restraint?"

"Have we got whom under restraint?"

"My husband, Marcus Pillsworth. Is he tied up?"

"He's under arrest," the judge said. "Should he be under restraint, too?"

"Should he!" Julie said. "He's mad! He tried to shoot us and when that didn't work he chased us with this frightful bus!"

"How awful!" the judge said. "Your husband appears to be a one-man crime wave."

"Then he took the silver and my jewelry!" Julie nodded. She turned to Mario. "Isn't that right, Mario?"

"Yes, Madonna," Mario said.

The judge shook his head. "Your husband hasn't missed a trick today. I never saw anyone so hell-bent for criminality."

"I want a divorce!" Julie cried. I . . . "

The judge held up a hand. "Just a minute!" he cried. "I'm losing track." He consulted the sheaf of reports before him. "Now, taking it from the beginning, your husband's crimes, since only this morning, include possession of lewd pictures, jail breaking, destruction of private property, resisting arrest, disturbing the peace, assaulting seven officers, collusion in an automobile theft, lewd and immoral conduct, two attempts at murder, harboring criminals and, now, grand larceny and perhaps an insurance swindle." The judge paused for breath. "That's just

hitting the high points."

"I want a divorce!" Julie insisted.

"You certainly shouldn't have any trouble getting one," the judge said firmly.

The skinny nudist, stirred uneasily. "Your honor," he said timidly, "what about our leaves? Now, they're beginning to dry out. They may even fall!"

The judge started, banging the gavel with reflexive nervousness. "Your leaves are entirely your own responsibility!" he snapped. "If they're drying out, then just don't rustle them."

"That doesn't allow us much freedom of movement," the nudist said.

"From what I've heard, that's probably all for the best. And if I hear any rustling I'll know what to make of it." The judge turned back to Julie. "After your husband answers the charges . . . "

At this point, Marc, responding to treatment, sat up and opened his eyes. He looked around at the assemblage and smiled bewilderedly.

"Fiend!" the judge thundered.

"Hold him back!" Julie screamed. "Don't let him near me!"

Marc started violently, and Floss put out a hand to steady him.

"Get your sticky hands off that man!" a voice hissed.

EVERYONE turned in surprise to see Toffee, newly reinstated to the realm of reality, move forward.

"I was only tryin' to help," Floss said defensively.

"I saw you palm that wallet," Toffee said hotly. "Put it back, you camp-following kewpie before I crack your plaster!"

"Okay," Floss said, replacing the wallet, "but I guess I've got as much right to him as you."

"You've also got a right to be carried out of here feet first!" Toffee said. Doubling her fists, she stepped forward. "What kind of flowers do you want on your coffin?"

"Why, you redhead hellcat . . . "

The gavel banged thunderously. "Just what's going on here?" the judge roared, leaning across the bench. He pointed to Toffee. "How did you get in here?"

Toffee moved sinuously toward the bench. "Don't upset yourself with worrisome details, judge," she smiled. "Let's just stop flubbing around here and get on the ball."

"What!" the judge yelled.

"You're far too upset to handle the situation sensibly. Anyone can see that."

"Are you in contempt of court?" the judge wheezed.

"Please don't ask me that," Toffee said sweetly. "Let's be friends."

"Now, look here . . ."

"Be calm, judge!" Toffee said. "If you don't settle down we'll have to find someone else. Now, who's being charged with what around here?"

"Who is that woman?" Julie demanded sharply.

Toffee smiled at her winsomely. "It would only upset you to know, dear," she murmured.

The gavel banged again, announcing that the judge had regained the gift of speech. "Silence in the court!" he bellowed. He turned eyes heavy with vexation on Toffee's pert face. "If I give you a resume of the court's activities until the awful moment of your intrusion, will that make you feel sufficiently included in things?"

"That would be fine, judge," Toffee said pleasantly.

"God in heaven!" the judge moaned and took a deep breath. In a rumbling voice he enumerated again the list of Marc's crimes. As he did so, Marc's expression became more and more incredulous.

"But that's not true!" he cried out. "Almost none of it, judge!"

"Certainly it isn't," Toffee said.

"In the first place, those lewd pictures were planted on him."

"That's right, judge," Hotstuff said contritely. "I eased 'em onto him."

"And he didn't wreck any store, either," Toffee said hotly. "It was the sergeant and his clumsy chums. As for assaulting them, I'd be happy to oblige."

"And about the bus," Marc said. "I hadn't any reason to suspect it was stolen."

"I guess that's right, judge," the driver said sadly. "I didn't tell him it wasn't mine."

"There's something else you didn't get straight, judge," the skinny nudist said. "His behavior wasn't lewd or immoral. It was just that he had his clothes on. Naturally, we were upset."

"He wasn't shootin' at anyone, either," Moose put in. "He was just tryin' to stop us."

"Wait a minute!" the judge yelled. "In a minute you'll be trying to tell me this Pillsworth is a saint." He coughed excitedly. "I'm pleased that you've all decided to incriminate yourselves, but you still haven't succeeded in clearing Pillsworth. There are still the charges of jail breaking and jewel robbery." He levelled his gaze on Marc. "What have you got to say to that?"

MARC'S interest, however, had been diverted by Hotstuff, who, for the past several minutes had been staring with unbroken fascination at Mario. Overlooking Hotstuff's begonia infested shorts, Marc followed the pickpocket's gaze across the courtroom.

The first thing Marc noticed was that Mario was not comfortable under Hotstuff's curious stare. The second was a large birthmark, roughly the shape of an eagle, on Mario's forearm.

"My word!" Marc murmured.

"Mr. Pillsworth!" the judge said. "Would you mind giving your attention to the court?"

"Oh, yes, your honor," Marc said, "I was just noticing the birthmark on Mr. Matalini's arm. Its resemblance to an eagle is remarkable."

"Birthmark?" the judge said, glancing at Mario. "What birthmark?"

"Well, judge," Marc said, "you can't see it. But with my eyes the way they are . . ."

"Mayfair Marvin!" Hotstuff ejaculated loudly. "Well, I'll be damned!"

"You be quiet!" the judge said. "No one asked you anything."

"But I'm telling you something!" Hotstuff said excitedly. "That guy is Mayfair Marvin with a dye job and a moustache. He's one of the hottest international jewel

thieves in the racket!"

"What!" the judge said. "Isn't there anyone innocent in this court?"

Mario, who had suddenly lost his ruddy complexion, edged toward the exit. "That's preposterous!" he said.

"Yeah?" Hotstuff drawled. "Let's check that birthmark with the official descriptions." He turned to Julie. "If you want to know where your jewelry is, lady, just ask this bum."

Stricken, Julie turned to Mario, who refused to meet her gaze.

"How about it, Marvin?" Hotstuff said. "Do you fork over the rocks or do I tell the court about that job in London when . . ."

"All right!" the bogus Mario said weakly. He turned to Julie. "If you look under the hedge at the end of the drive you'll find your jewelry buried there. I meant to come back for it later, after a fortuitous call to the bedside of my dying mother."

"Sergeant Feeney," the judge said, "grab that man and have him locked up."

"Yes, your honor," Sergeant Feeney said and, taking Mario by the arm, relievedly escorted him from the room. As he did so, Julie buried her face in her hands and began to cry.

"There!" Toffee said elatedly, turning to the judge, "you see? There goes another charge!"

"There's still the one of jail breaking," the judge said spitefully. "It simply means that the charges, instead of being centralized with one man, are now more evenly distributed. In a minute now I'm going to start throwing sentences around here like rice at a wedding. The lot of you—with the exception of Mrs. Pillsworth—can start planning a nice long retirement."

AS the judge leaned down to a study and rearrange the reports before him, Toffee turned quickly to Marc.

"Do you still have the elixir?" she asked.

"Huh?" Marc said, his eyes on Julie.

"The elixir," Toffee said. "Give it to me!"

"Oh, that," Marc murmured. He reached into his pocket, extracted the partially filled bottle and handed it over. "Here."

"Thanks," Toffee said. She advanced happily to the bench and stood for a moment gazing soulfully into the judge's scowling countenance.

"If you need some help," she said demurely, "I'll be glad to give you a hand. You'll probably never figure it out all by yourself."

"What!" the judge said, infuriated.

"Well, let's face it," Toffee said innocently, "with a muckle-head like you running the show we'll never get anywhere."

"You *are* in contempt!" the judge screamed. "I thought so all along!"

"Well, you must admit it's a pretty contemptible court," Toffee said. "Nothing personal, judge, but . . ."

"Silence!" the judge cried. "Dont' say another word or I may have to send myself up for murder! I . . ." The rest was lost in a fit of coughing.

Quickly, a triumphant gleam in her eye, Toffee reached to the water pitcher at the side of the bench, emptied the elixir into it and poured a draft for the judge.

"Here, judge," she said, "pull yourself together."

The judge drained the glass and, closing his eyes, leaned back in his chair. Through the ensuing silence, Toffee returned to Marc's side.

"His honor may see things a little differently now," she mused.

"Why should he?" Marc said angrily. "All you've done is insult him."

"I also fed him the elixir."

"You—you gave him that!"

"In the water," Toffee nodded.

"I hope it works."

"But it's unpredictable! There's no telling how he'll react."

"Any change," Toffee said, "is bound to be an improvement."

During this exchange, the judge seemed to have fallen into a doze. For a time, while the court waited breathlessly, he remained still, then he stirred. Drowsily, he opened his eyes and sat up. Looking enormously refreshed, he surveyed the defendants before him blankly for a moment and then, quite astonishingly, grinned with a sort of gentle mischievousness. He looked around at Sergeant Feeney, who had just returned from the cells.

"Well, hello, sergeant," he said. He made an inquiring gesture toward the defendants. "Who are all these attractive people?"

"Huh?" grunted Sergeant Feeney. "Why they're bein' tried, your honor."

"Tried?" the judge said. "How do you mean?"

"You're tryin' them, that's all," Sergeant Feeney said, puzzled.

"I am!" the judge said. "Then I must stop it instantly. I assume that when you say they're being tried, you mean someone has been very trying with them. I can see, now that you mention it, they look a bit put out. Well, we'll have to do something about that." He smiled at Marc and Toffee and the

others with winning graciousness. "I want you to know that I'm grateful to you all for coming today, and I'm sorry if I've bored you." He turned back to Sergeant Feeney. "Have I been lecturing on the life of the mollusk again, or something like that?"

SERGEANT Feeney observed the judge quizzically. "Your honor, this is a gang of desperate criminals and you're the judge who's . . ."

"Oh, no, no!" the judge laughed suddenly. "Oh, you're mistaken, sergeant! I'm no judge." His expression, however, became thoughtful. "It's curious, though, that you should think that, because I do have a vague recollection that I once was a judge—though it may have been a dream—and I wanted nothing more than to forget it. I got so weary of having to be virtuous all the time. But, I'm sure it was only a dream. Aren't you?"

"Your honor!" the skinny nudist said plaintively. "I really think something ought to be done about our leaves!"

"Your leaves?" the judge asked.

"Yes, your honor. We need fresh ones desperately."

"My, my," the judge said admiringly, "don't you all look cool and comfortable, though?"

"Huh?" the nudist said. "You

mean you aren't sore at us any more for being nudists?"

"Sore at you?" the judge said. "Why should I be sore at you? As a matter of fact I'll tell you a little secret." Abandoning the bench and descending to the floor, he lifted his robes to display a pair of bare and knobby knees. "On warm days I never wear pants!" he chortled.

"My gosh!" the nudist said.

"Hey, what about us?" Hotstuff said. "Are you going to let them off and send us up for taking pot shots at Mario?"

"Did you do *that!*" the judge said delightedly. "Of course I don't know this Mario of yours, but I'm sure it did the scamp a world of good to have his pot shot at." He looked around fondly at the assemblage. "But what are we all doing indoors on a lovely day like this? Why don't we all go on a picnic or something?"

"Then you mean we're all dismissed?" Toffee asked. "We can go?"

"Why certainly, you lovely child," the judge said benignly. "Run along and get into some sort of beautiful mischief. And if there's anything I can do to help . . ."

"You've already done it," Toffee said. She turned to Marc. "Come on!"

But Marc was watching Julie as she turned and started disconsolately to leave the court.

"Julie!" he called. "Julie!"

"Hey, now," Toffee said, "don't tell me you're going to go chasing after that thin blonde just because you married her once!"

Marc remained heedless. "Julie!" he cried, starting after her. "Wait a minute!"

"Oh, yeah!" Toffee said and, deftly, she put her foot in front of his.

Marc shot out into space head first and came up abruptly against the leg of a table. He dropped to the floor, made a small twitching movement and went limp.

"Julie!" he murmured.

"That'll show you, you big stiff," Toffee said. "You can't just toss me aside like a . . ."

And then, as Marc passed out, she, like the words she never finished, faded away into nothing . . .

"What a stunning girl," the judge murmured thoughtfully. "There's something so elusive about her."

At his side, Sergeant Feeney fainted dead away.

IN his sub-conscious world of gently sloping knolls and strange feathery trees, Marc lounged on the cool greenness and smiled up at Toffee.

"Sometimes," he said, "I'm not certain which is truly real, this world or the other."

"Reality is only relative," Toffee said sagely. "After all, if you didn't believe in me, I wouldn't exist." She leaned down close and brushed her lips across his. "You wouldn't even be able to feel my kiss. Reality can be happy or sad, depending on how you look at it. If you see only the happy side of things . . ."

She paused as the light began to flicker uncertainly in the glowing sky above them. "It's time for you to go back now; I'll have to continue this little sermon another time." She touched his cheek. "It's been a lovely day, Marc. Goodbye—until we can do it all over again . . ."

"Goodbye," Marc said, "and thanks."

The light flickered again and was gone. Marc felt himself begin to drift.

"Goodbye . . ."

* * *

"Marc!" the voice cried.

Marc looked up to find Julie bending over him. He was relieved to note that she now appeared fully dressed.

"Oh, can you ever forgive me?" Julie said. "It was Mario who suggested I take the jewels to the country—in case he needed them

for the portrait. And when we were out by the stream this afternoon . . ."

"Never mind," Marc said. "It's all over now, let's forget it. Will you help me up?"

Taking his arm, Julie guided him to his feet.

"Look, dear," she said, "couldn't you drive back to the country with me? A few days vacation wouldn't hurt too much, surely. You'd like to, wouldn't you?"

"I'd love to," Marc said suddenly. He took her hand in his. "Let's go."

"You poor dear," Julie murmured. "I wonder how you stood it, with everyone saying such awful things about you when you really hadn't done anything at all."

Together, they left the court and started down the walk toward the convertible.

As they left the city and started into the country, Marc pulled the car over to the side of the highway and give his attention to the drama of the brilliant sunset.

"Well," he sighed, "there it goes, the first day of spring."

"Thank heavens," Julie said. "Now we can relax and enjoy it."

But there was still a question nagging at the back of Marc's mind.

"I was just thinking, dear," he said, "about your birthday . . ."

"Birthday!" Julie said. "But that's months away yet!"

"But, still," Marc said, "I was wondering what you'd like for a gift: I thought maybe some nice pink lace underwear . . ."

"Pink lace underwear!" Julie said. She began to laugh.

"What's so funny?" Marc asked suspiciously.

"Darling," Julie said, "don't you remember the pink lace underwear mother gave me for Christmas and how I loathed it? Well, I brought it to the country where it wouldn't matter just so I could wear it out and get rid of it."

Marc's relief came to the sur-

face in a smile. "Then pink lace is out, huh?"

"Definitely," Julie said. "But if you insist on lingerie, get me something wicked and black. No true siren would ever dream of letting herself be caught in pink."

Marc reached across the seat and drew her close to him. "In the springtime," he said, "a young man's likely to get fancy."

The sun, on the horizon, slid conveniently out of sight and was gone. As it did, a breeze blew lightly through the car and somewhere, it seemed, there was laughter.

The End

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A strange experiment was taking place on the third planet of an isolated solar system. In all the Universe there was no parallel to —

The Incredible Life - Form

by

Winston Marks

To: The Director

From: Tone Seng Froot, Investigator for galaxies of 9th Sector.

Subject: Unique characteristic of life-form suggesting urgent action to rescind life charter to Element 6.

SIR,
May I draw your attention to an explosive potential in your early experimental series? This exists in an obscure solar system in nine planets in a minor galaxy on the outer perimeter of my territory where I call only at extended intervals.

You will best recall the location in connection with the assignment of a Self-Awareness Charter to Element 6 in the chemical series—more specifically, the crystalline form of *carbon*, as it is called locally.

I have not troubled you with my earlier surveys, since nothing

critical occurred in the first billion years, but I had better bring you up to date.

Of all 96 elements to which life has been separately assigned in various locations, carbon showed the greatest durability at the outset. The diamond, or crystalline form, in which self-awareness was vested in this particular solar system, could be predicted to make efficient use of light energy because of its index of refraction. Also, at lower temperatures, the diamond presents an extreme rigidity or hardness which resists abrasion.

Perhaps these factors account for the astonishing egotism which developed shortly after we activated self-awareness among them. Not that egotism, itself, is unique in the various elemental life-forms. You will recall, this inflated self-esteem has long proved to be a fac-



tor consistent with self-awareness in all matter.

In the diamond, egotism flared early in its intellectual growth and seemed to supply a creative drive unsurpassed in all galaxies under surveillance.

On the third planet, diamonds quickly learned psychokinetic manipulations and immediately began

experimenting with chemical combinations of the other elements—all of which are, of course, inert and lifeless in this galaxy.

On one of my earliest visits to the third planet, which is locally referred to as Terra, or Earth, I was attracted to the especially active, intellectual radiations of a particular diamond which I shall

designate as *Prime*, since he was the one who out-stripped all the others ultimately.

Prime had worked his way out of the blue clay, down to the edge of a salt-water ocean, and when I inquired into his furious activity he reported that he was attempting to synthesize a new life-form.

At that time I was amused. Prime had managed to construct a few rather prosaic molecules, but none of them could accomplish self-growth by the usual absorption of radiant energy. I asked his purpose in such experimentation.

He answered, "What was your purpose in creating life in me?"

To compare his own motives with those of my gracious director was so absurdly egotistical that I made a note to check back with this same individual on my next round. Amusement is rare in my occupation, as you can conceive, and I appreciated the humor of this supremely confident bit of carbon trash, thinking he could play creator!

His project seemed harmless, so I left without disturbing him further.

On my next call I did search out Prime again, and great was my surprise to discover that not only had he managed to invest automatic growth and reproduction into a few complex molecules, but that he

had attacked the problem from an entirely new concept, so far as I have yet determined.

ON the southern tip of the land continent where I discovered Prime, still near the ocean, I found him surrounded with a growth which he called vegetation. Then he bade me examine the content of the salt water, and I beheld tiny aquatic creatures of many varieties, some active, some vegetative, but all reproducing with lusty prolificity.

"What are these land growths?" I asked.

He proudly replied, "I call them *lichens* and *mosses*."

"But how do they absorb energy from your sun?"

"I have invented a complex compound which can accomplish this," he said. "I call it *chlorophyll*. But you have many more surprises in store for you," he warned. "Wait until your next visit."

I was entranced, but his work appeared still to be no more than an oddity, so I let it pass.

Prime was quite right. On my next visit he showed me his crowning achievement. He called it *animal life*, a division of his so-called *organic* creations.

Here he departed almost entirely from our known concept of life-

forms. Prime's animals maintained life, or at least a convincing simulation thereof, by ingesting other organic life-forms, both vegetative and animal, and through an awkward procedure of digestion and devious, chemical transformations, generated an interior source of energy.

What almost made me report the whole affair at that time was this innovation: Prime's animal life-forms now existed entirely independent of direct radiant energy! Instead, they substituted, of all things, heat-energy, gained from simple oxidation of various so-called organic compounds.

At this point I asked a question to which Prime gave me a very revealing answer. I asked, "How do you define the term, 'organic compound'?"

He lay there in the sun, flashing his iridescence at me in brilliant sparkles from his random facets and announced in a haughty manner: "Organic pertains to any carbon-containing life-form, of which I am the originator, of course."

Now I understood a part of the immensity of Prime's egotism. In devising his own life-form he built it around his own element in which Terra abounds, largely in the gaseous dioxide compound.

I presumed that Prime had attempted to pass on the great Char-

ter of Life to the non-crystalline forms of carbon about him, and, failing that, he enlisted the other elements in combination with carbon to produce his desired end.

Imagine such circuitry, though! Substituting heat energy for light as the basic life-fuel!

I was no longer amused. Inflated by his success, his over-bearing self-esteem began to rankle a bit. "What," I asked, "of self-awareness? Your life-forms are quite pointless if you fail to stimulate self-awareness in them."

"I agree," he said promptly. "It would be futile to create life without self-determination. You have returned a little too early to see the end of my experiment," he said. "On your next visit I will reveal the purpose of my whole project."

Rather than file a premature estimate of the affair, I held my notes and accepted Prime's challenge to wait and see. Had I insisted at that time on knowing his intentions, I might have had the wisdom to restrain him, but then again who could have anticipated what happened? Not even Prime, himself, realized that his life-form would get out of hand the way it did.

ON my final trip to Terra I had an extremely difficult time locating Prime. His emanations

were so weak as to be almost indistinguishable in the screaming ruck of sensations that met my startled perceptions.

Part of my difficulty was the fact that the whole planet reeked with noxious nuclear-type radiation that made long-range communication with Prime virtually impossible. When I finally found him he was imprisoned in the grip of a gold setting on a ring-like artifact worn by a decomposing life-form.

"I am quite happy to see you," Prime greeted me with the first note of welcome I had ever received from him.

"Is this grotesque cadaver your wonderful life-form that you promised?" I jeered at him. Then I noticed that Prime's surface had been chipped into geometrically precise facets of ingenious angles which would enable him to make maximum use of light absorption—were it not for the fact that his entire surface was charred with a coating of oxidation such as would occur after exposure to excessive heat.

It was this near-opacity of his outer surface that had reduced Prime to his weakened condition.

"If you will be so good as to assist me to remove the char from my skin, I will proceed with a very important mission," he said.

Looking about me at the evi-

dence of an advanced mechanico-primitive civilization, recently devastated by apparent atomic disruption, I demanded, "What is this important mission?"

"To destroy the one remaining *human* on Terra."

"What might a *human* be?" I countered.

"The appendage to which you find my gold setting attached belonged to a living *human* at one time. Perfection of this animal was the goal toward which I was striving on your last visit."

I began removing the charred coating from Prime questioning him further. "Did you succeed in developing self-awareness in your *human* life-form?"

"Completely," he replied with a note of subdued triumph. "Much too successfully, in fact."

And then he related the true purpose of his whole project. It seems that, through the ages, Prime and his fellow diamonds brought a most complicated life-form into being by a rather trial-and-error process of evolution. By psychokinesis they instilled a system of reproduction and heredity dependent upon bio-chemical devices he called *chromosomes*. These were composed of tinier units, or *genes*, which were easily manipulated to change any given strain.

In such a manner Prime and his

fellows evolved this human life-form, and if I may say so, the most was made of the animal potentialities I first witnessed on the beach. The human model was a bi-symmetrical biped with two upper appendages which terminated in clever, five-fingered vises. These latter accounted for the complex artifacts with which Terra was strewn.

Prime proudly helped me dissect one of the dead creatures, and I believe what struck me most was the plumbing. Visualize, if you can, a closed system of nutrient fluid, called *blood*, circulating through 100,000 miles (see enclosed equivalent chart) of semi-flexible conduit arranged in an exceedingly complex network. This blood is held at precisely 98.4 degrees Fahrenheit (see chart) in spite of widely varying exterior temperatures. But most fantastic is the pump which makes a complete circulation of the total blood volume every one and a quarter minutes (see chart)! What an organ! Although its weight is measured in ounces (see chart) each 24-hours (see chart) it pulses about 100,000 times, moving 10 or more tons (see chart) of blood through it!

WELL, this was only one of the physical-chemical oddities Prime installed in his heat-life-form contrivance. The other which

I shall describe at this time was the so-called *brain*, or seat of intelligence. By a rather sluggish and clumsy system of electron-flow, the human's brain controlled physical activities, stored memories and managed a perverted form of thinking that was too intimately involved with sub-conscious, bodily interferences ever to amount to much.

Nevertheless, this outrageously complicated thought-organ was the seat of Prime's catastrophe, and also, it has proved to be the source of the subject of this report.

Early in Prime's animal-evolution, he explained, his animal's brain developed what he described as an *instinct for survival*. I interpret this as meaning simply an excessive desire to remain in a state of self-awareness.

Please note, this is quite aside from a secondary instinct, that of reproduction or survival of the race, which is *not* unheard of elsewhere.

But in Prime's humans, this tremendous desire for survival of the individual grew into a virtual obsession. I tested Prime, himself, on this factor, and found him quite normal. He had no feeling at all on the subject of remaining self-aware. I had thought this unseemly human characteristic might have been a perversion from his unheal-

thy egotism, but patently it was not.

Therefore, I had to conclude that the human's high drive to self-preservation was of a spontaneous nature, deriving as one of the random results of Prime's unique heat-life-forms.

Anyway, Prime had been so intent in accomplishing his earlier purpose that he gave it little thought until it was too late. This purpose, incidentally, was the only shred of amusement I could salvage from this last trip.

It developed that Prime and his fellow diamonds bred this whole life-strain principally to satisfy their insatiable egos. You see, they finally inculcated into their humans a great love and admiration for diamonds—so much so that they were declared the prince of gems and valued most highly for their ornamental value.

Entirely ignorant that diamonds contained a self-awareness of their own, humans toiled and strained to dig them from deep mines just to fashion them into baubles for their own adoration.

Here again, Prime asserted a crude genius. Not only did he create a whole life-form and induce its members to worship him, but also he insinuated the desire and skill into humans to cut and polish their diamonds in a manner to

provide a maximum of light refraction. Prime and many others of his Terra kin, enjoyed high stimulation from being so cut, polished, transported and worshipped.

And so Prime's incredible motives were finally divulged.

A few years (see chart) before my final return, however, Prime's humans, in their sluggish way, stumbled upon some rudimentary universal facts about the construction of the atom.

Until this time, as I stated, the humans' extreme obsession with survival had been of no concern to Prime, although the instinct had brought his prize animal into a savage, vicious, condition of belligerence that resulted in highly destructive warfare among various groups.

Atomic power changed all this rather quickly. Where humans had previously only managed to slaughter other organic life-forms and each other, now they began detonating nuclear devices. And in the process even the durable diamond family suffered many casualties.

AT this point, I gather, Prime's egotism became somewhat sublimated into outrage and anger, that his adoring subjects could be so thoughtless as to destroy their precious diamonds along with their own populace.

After the initial incident in an area called Japan, Prime passed the word to all his fellows, and they deliberately spurred the humans on to produce great piles of nuclear ammunition. Later, by clever manipulation of the humans' sub-conscious emotions and instincts of self-preservation, Prime's culture ironically turned this unique attribute back on the humans. They were goaded into a self-destroying atomic war that accomplished Prime's vengeance in a very brief time.

True, a great number of diamonds were destroyed in the holocaust, but as I mentioned, Prime was not at all contaminated with this survival-of-the-individual instinct of his created life-forms.

Rather, he gloated and took immense egotistical pleasure in the destruction of his creations.

When I came upon him that last day in his oxidized condition he had only one regret. He confessed that a single human individual had escaped the radio-active destruction. Blinded and weakened, he was at the point of despair when I scraped the black oxidation from his exterior. It was this last human's death which he named when I asked him the nature of his mission.

He invited me to come along, solely, I suspect, to save him the

strenuous task of teleportation of his own mass to the vicinity of the human.

As he bid, I carried him across one ocean, deep into the interior of a continent he called North America. My curiosity was at some pitch to meet a living specimen of Prime's paternity, although I gave him no inkling of my sharp interest.

We found this human, a *female*, (see chart) near the peak of a mountain. Her abode was a great cave lined with lead, air-tight and littered with mechanical devices to filter the air she breathed and otherwise provide for her survival.

Prime explained that this female had been considered a highly beautiful example of her kind, yet she was also a scientist of some reputation.

Her scientific ability and remarkable foresight were quite apparent from the scrupulous pains she had taken to avoid destruction—since that was her motivation in secreting herself in the wilderness.

Her appearance, however, was anything but thrilling to me. The protuberance that Prime called her *head* was covered with a sickly yellow tangle of filaments. The organs for sight, hearing, aeration and speaking were unsightly bumps, holes and gashes. I will admit that the way she moved her

torso and appendages did have a certain exotic rhythm, but by and large I was unimpressed by her physical appearance.

With my assistance, Prime and I materialized inside her abode without violating the integrity of her air-tight structure. I placed Prime on the female's *table* (see chart) where she was busily ingesting preserved organic material from an open vessel of alloyed metals.

She gasped, and her visual sockets opened wide. I sensed fear-shock then admiration bordering on ecstasy. She grasped Prime with an appendage and held him up to a source of artificial light.

I fully expected him to strike her dead with the brain-searing power he could command, but did he? No! The worshipful emanations washed over him from the female's mind, and his anger dissipated.

"What a marvelous jewel!" the female exclaimed, little realizing that she was unwittingly protracting her life.

For the first time Prime communicated directly with a human being. He telepathed, "I am, indeed, a fine jewel. Six carats of flawless, blue-white!"

The female's face contorted, and her mind revealed fear again, fear for her sanity and a great confusion. Gradually, she calmed, however,

and I could see that in spite of his diminished anger, Prime was enjoying her agitation as well as her admiration.

"You are not mad," he said at length. "I am a diamond, all right, but feast your eyes well, for I have come to destroy you as I have the rest of your ungrateful race."

"Why? Why?" she cried, her appendages trembling and waves of fear beating out. Her eyes seemed to bulge in fascinated terror as she stared at Prime. She couldn't, of course, sense my presence, since she was minus that one critical perceptic.

Prime snapped back at her, "Because you are a race of hypocrites. You professed to love your diamonds, yet you have destroyed them by the thousands in your vandalistic warfare."

The thought was more than she could encompass, so Prime embraced her mind with a telepathic field and patiently revealed the whole, lengthy history of his creation of the human race and its delinquent failure to pay proper respect to its creator.

WHEN she recovered from the overwhelming revelation she threw back her head and exclaimed, "The secret of human life! The eternal goal of the philosophers! And I have learned it!"

She broke into an emotional laugh that defies my powers of description. In it were vestiges of irony, amusement, self-pity and terror, but none of the adoring remorse that Prime had been seeking.

Then suddenly a little corner of her brain blocked itself off from both Prime and me. She said, "But if you destroy me, who will be left to love you and admire you?"

Through some oversight of logic, this had never occurred to Prime, which was indicative of his many deficiencies. Not that his logic had much to recommend it, but at least he might have been consistent.

At the time she spoke thusly she fondled Prime and moved him closer to the light. Attuned as I was to the female through Prime's perceptics, I slowly became entranced with the spell she cast over him.

She said, "I don't doubt that you can destroy me, and perhaps I deserve it. But how proud I am to have custody of the most exquisite diamond in the whole world—even if it is only for a few seconds before I perish."

May I point out at this stage that the female's behavior was now solely motivated by this above-mentioned *survival* instinct. In the face of almost certain extinction she was mustering every wile and

emotional device at her command to influence Prime to spare her insignificant life.

The effect on Prime was fantastic. He flashed cold fire from his facets, and his sensuous delight was a thing of embarrassment.

Yet, in proximity to him as I was, I could not avoid some of the exotic essence of her transparent flattery. I found myself trying to justify Prime's change.

He said at last, "You are quite right, woman. It is fitting that the last human on earth live to pay respect to the creator of her race."

Instantly the female's whole attitude changed. With the realization that she had Prime in her control, she became demanding.

"Of course, I shall require some consideration, too," she said.

"Whatever is necessary to provide for your comfort shall be accomplished," he agreed without hesitation. "What did you have in mind?"

"A mate," she said. "You destroyed my mate in the first Soviet attack. You must give me a mate."

Prime thought that one over. "But then there would be children," he objected, dimly aware that somehow his recent resolve was being subverted.

"Of course," she said. "Many of them. All the more to worship you. And when my mate and I die, we

will leave others behind to continue our devotion to you."

"Well, I don't know," Prime said, but there was no longer any doubt in the female's mind—nor in my own.

After all he had endured for the sake of vengeance, Prime was prepared to produce a mate for this female and begin the whole silly business all over again!

At this point I withdrew.

As you can see, this instinct for survival or self-preservation is a

fabulously potent factor, and if *man* is ever allowed loose in the universe it is difficult to foresee where it might end.

In my opinion we are hardly justified in continuing the Life-Charter to the crystalline carbon element in this galaxy. Regardless of Prime's pseudo-brilliance of biochemical creation, never in all my travels have I encountered such an egotistical, futile, fickle-minded *chucklehead* (see chart for equivalent). *End of report.*

THE END

* *Jet Pilots Passe!* *

THE glamorous jet-pilots race their meteoric vehicles across the sky and then come down to weep. They, like the dinosaurs, are a doomed and vanishing species. It is an irrevocable fact that flesh and blood cannot compete with steel muscles and hydraulic sinews.

The modern jet plane and its immediate consequence, the rocket plane, are becoming too complex to be handled by the molasses-slow reactions of human eyes and nerves and hands. As a result, while the jets will survive for a few decades as offensive and defensive aerial machines, their role in any future war will be strictly limited; it will be neatly and completely replaced by that cold-blooded robot, that true robot, the guided missile.

Recently, when Winston Churchill was reassuring the House of Commons on Britain's defenses, he stressed that in the laboratories were guided missiles of fantastic capabilities. The same thing is true here and in Russia.

A modern fighter pilot attempting to knock down another fighter plane is really fighting a battle of radar screens, computing machines and electric power. Often he never sees the opponent he destroys. Essentially he is an electronic technician. And as speeds and accelerations go up, his efficiency and usefulness goes down. Anything he can do is done too slowly. Only photo-cells and electric motors move rapidly enough.

It is clear that the modern form

of aerial warfare is evolving into a battle between guided missiles—pure robots whose unerring radio senses are superior to anything but the brains on the ground guiding them.

For example, the only way in which a three thousand mile an hour rocket loaded with an atomic bomb can be intercepted, is by another rocket. This interceptor must be guided by radio, heat or light, and its maneuvers cannot be controlled by human muscles. If it has better technical construction than its victim, it will with absolute certainty destroy that invader.

Even today's six hundred mile an hour planes find it difficult to destroy each other because the speeds are too great to permit aiming, sighting, and firing. And so while military men continue to build up huge fleets, actually their expectations lie in laboratories where the

miracles are created. Not much is said or released for public consumption, but it is safe to assume that even now, we would be astonished if we could realize what exists in the way of robotic guided missiles.

The V-1 and V-2 were primitive forerunners—and they were impossible to fight without equivalent guided missiles to oppose them. As a result science-fiction's long dream of the robot war—at least in the air—is a certainty. It is a simple truism that a rocket for example can only be brought down by a faster projectile—another rocket. And human beings can man neither of them!

The next time you see an impressive jet whistling overhead across the sky, just remind yourself that you are looking at a vanishing species, not so different in many ways than the dodo!



"A fellow can certainly enjoy himself at one of these Earth parties!"

The Invisible Enemy

by

Arnold Castle

At fifteen he was sent to war to fight an enemy he couldn't understand. But more puzzling was the victory to be won — after he met defeat!

IT was the day.

The automobile with its three passengers moved slowly along the quiet morning street. There was no need for hurry.

The boy's father was soberly recalling his own war experiences, wondering how similar Tom's would be. The mother was remembering vividly fragments of films, of facsimile reports, of forgotten conversations, envisioning her son cringing pathetically in a shallow foxhole as the penultimate weapon burst into grisly glory in the dark dawn sky. Tom's own thoughts were tense, but he managed to conceal his nervousness from his parents.

"We're here, son," his father announced calmly, pulling the car up to the curb.

"Dear, can't we drive around

the block just once?" his mother asked, her voice almost a whisper.

"We're early."

"No, mom," Tom said crisply. He opened the door and stepped out onto the sidewalk.

"Want us to go in, son?"

"No thanks, Dad."

"But we want to, Tom," his mother said. "Of course, we'll go in!"

"There's no need for you to. I'm already registered," he told her. He reached out to grip his father's hand.

"Tom!" his mother protested.

"Don't worry about me." He kissed her hurriedly, and was relieved when his father drove away without waiting for him to start up the steps. He knew that they would worry, and he turned abruptly, forcing his attention away.

The day was bright and a chill



breeze swept in from the Pacific. Atop a distant hill eucalyptus glimmered in the white sunlight. Inscribed over the portal of the modest building which he now faced were the words:

DEPARTMENT OF PEACE
"THAT THE AGE OF
VIOLENCE MAY FOR-
EVER REMAIN HISTORY"

Bullets splattered into the mound in front of the foxhole, sending a dense spray of dust and gravel into the pit. Tom spit out the mouthful of dirt and cursed.

"They comin'?" the soldier next to him asked, waking slightly.

"No." Tom told him gloomily. "But they know where we are."

"Maybe they'll try mortar. Think they'll try mortar?"

Tom shrugged. "Go on back to sleep. I'm watching."

The other was several years older than he, and a corporal, but not very bright. Still, it was better than being alone. The worst thing he could imagine was having to face the enemy utterly alone. If only he could remember what the enemy looked like, it would not be so bad.

He forgot so much. Sometimes it seemed like he had been in combat just a few days. But other times it felt like he had been up there forever, waiting, moving forward,

moving backward, thinking that at last he was beginning to get the picture, but not sure, never sure, never sure of *anything*. If only he could recall something beside the immediate present. Then maybe the situation would start to make a little sense.

He knew why he was fighting, vaguely. It was to safeguard certain inalienable rights, which ones he could not exactly remember. The odd thing was that the enemy was fighting for the same goal — he sensed that intuitively. But who was the enemy? He thought he had known once, but that had been quite a while ago. What did they look like? He would have to ask someone.

An infrared flare blossomed some distance down the valley. Tom adjusted his binoculars and scanned the slope. Nothing. Remotely the monotonous rumble of atomic artillery began pounding through the night. From far away echoed the transient whisper of a jet.

Now his legs were beginning to get cramped. That happened every night, and he knew that no matter which way he bent them the pain would continue to grow. However, there was always the consolation that toward morning they would become numb.

He opened his one remaining ration can, tore back the layers of

thermofoil insulation, and started devouring the warm lamb stew. The dull staccato of automatic fire commenced far down the valley. Somebody screamed.

Tom contemplated his own flashless weapon, trying to recall what he had been taught about its principle of expulsion. That had been so far back. A year? Two? He did not remember.

It was time for the corporal to take over the watch, but Tom decided to give him another ten minutes. Wearily, he raised the binoculars to his eyes, pushed the switch. The battery was about exhausted and he replaced it. Overhead a flare was drifting downward, and he watched as it illuminated the murky battle ground.

“Light up!” the platoon sergeant growled.

The troops had been waiting for a quarter of an hour beside the road. Tom had long since learned the futility of speculation. But conversation was vital and there had to be a topic.

“Maybe they’re trying to get trucks for us,” he muttered to the soldier next to him.

“Maybe they’re plannin’ a picnic for us,” the other suggested.

“Trucks. Picnics. You guys make everything too complicated,” a third soldier remarked. “Every time

something happens you figure out a different reason for it. Not me. The way I see it, there’s just one cause for everything they tell us to do or don’t do, say or don’t say, think or don’t think. And that’s *discipline*. Look at it that way and you’re always one ahead of ‘em.”

“I like the idea of a picnic,” the other replied obstinately. “Only it’s supposed to be a surprise, and that’s why they don’t tell us nothin’.”

“Okay, you guys. Strip those butts!”

Tom hoisted the straps of his pack onto his aching shoulders and fell into file behind the other two. The heel of his left boot was wearing badly and he could sense the strain on his ankle. He tried placing his weight on the ball of his foot, but that made him limp. Then he had no time for concern with small discomforts, for the column was scattering at the distant whoosh of jets.

Tom, however, got no farther than the ditch.

The soldier who liked picnics had stumbled onto a discarded recoilless rifle shell ten feet from the road. It exploded at the contact. Tom did not hear the jets roar past, for the pain that had burst in his leg was deafening. Momentarily he experienced a curious detached

awareness of both the agony of the wound and the contortions into which he was throwing his body. Then he collapsed on the weed-matted gravel, unconscious.

He woke to find two medical aid men seated beside him. The pain had lessened and the wound was all but covered. He watched furtively as a corporal completed the job of daubing the gummy white substance from a freshly opened can of plastoderm into a raw gash below his right knee. He hoped none of the ligaments had been torn, since they would take a lot longer to evolve from the undifferentiated surrogate than would the rest of the tissues. Tentatively he flexed his foot muscles; they seemed all right.

"Just lean back, buddy. You're okay, now," he was informed.

"How about the jets? We hit any of them?" he asked.

"Couldn't tell, but I don't think so. They got what they were after, though."

"Yeah? What was that?"

"Convoy of trucks comin' to pick us up. That's what I hear, anyway."

Tom was silent for a while. Then he asked: "I'm not going to have any trouble with that, am I?"

"No, but take it easy for the next couple of days. I'll put a bandage on it, but it takes time for that

stuff to gel."

He went to work on the bandage, while his companion started packing up the apparatus. Five minutes later they had gone.

Tom lay thinking. None of his questions had yet been answered. He still could not think coherently about even the recent past. And nobody had been able to state clearly just whom they were fighting, though everyone agreed on the motives for the war: they were defending freedom against tyranny—it was as simple and as basic as that. However, it somehow left Tom unsatisfied.

"Well, what did I tell you?" the soldier next to him remarked. "Discipline. No trucks. No picnic. Just discipline. Say, how about a cigarette. I must have dropped mine in the scramble."

"Sure." Tom threw him a mashed, half-empty pack.

"Hey, thanks. He lit one, carefully buttoning the rest in a pocket of his fatigue jacket. "Thanks a lot."

"Okay, you guys," came the hoarse command. "Strip them butts! We're movin'."

"Discipline" the soldier muttered bitterly, crushing the cigarette into the gravel. "Discipline."

THE night was quiet, too quiet. There were remote and occa-

sional atomic artillery bursts. But no other noise.

The two other members of the patrol were immediately ahead of Tom. But they progressed slowly and made little sound. Tom crept forward a single notch, looking up only when he had sunk again into the grass. On either side there was nothing but blackness. Once more he squirmed forward with his boots and forearms. Still there was only the quiet and darkness of night. He lay there for a while, waiting and wondering.

He had ceased pondering those questions which had most concerned him during the earlier days. Now he asked himself only when would it be over. Nothing else any longer seemed to matter. But more and more frequently there had come to his mind a single irrelevant memory. It was an image of a clear day, of a cool breeze off the ocean, of a crest of green and gold eucalyptus on a faraway hill. It had something to do with home. But that was all he knew of it, and it was all he could recall of home.

A burst of flashless automatic fire from somewhere up the ridge brought a scream from the soldier in front of him and sent him writhing down the slope. Tom lowered himself till he was on a level with the sight of his carbine, then started scanning the rise. A moment

later he spotted the greenish glow of the sniper's infrared beam, and flipping the safety onto automatic, he squeezed the trigger. Rapidly he replaced the clip and waited. After several moments, he uncautiously flooded the terrain with his own light. A mere hundred feet away was a sprawling greenish form. One of the enemy. A good and dead one.

It was ten minutes before he heard the remaining member of the patrol working his way back.

"Good boy!" came a whisper. "You got him."

"What about—"

"What do *you* think?"

"Are we going back?"

"Sure. There ain't no troops up there. That's what we came to find out. Maybe a few snipers is all."

They started crawling the way they had come. But this time it was more tedious because of the abrasions and bruises that had been incurred. Dawn was a pastey gray in the sky behind them when they at last neared the lines.

"Something funny," the sergeant muttered suspiciously, rising to his knees.

"What's wrong," Tom asked wearily.

"I don't know. Wait here." Tom waited till the sky threatened to become light, then began following. He continued along the route which he felt must lead to the lines, but

after some minutes began to feel a sense of panic. The landmarks were all wrong and the cloud-strewn sky gave no indication of direction. Then, from the other side of a low, rocky hillock came the unmistakable sound of approaching troops. Running forward to the edge, he stopped abruptly as he found himself face to face with the enemy.

Suddenly all the hate and guilt he had ever known exploded into his awareness. The face before him was a meaningless blur, but he did not need to know the enemy to loathe him. His carbine was in his hands, the safety off, the barrel lowered, the trigger squeezed—but the rifle failed to fire.

The cry of the enemy was a wordless oath of anger, the bayonet a glinting sliver of death, the pain in his side the ultimate peak of agony. But as he fell back onto the rocks, he sensed something beyond rage in the bright young eyes of his destroyer. He sensed hope — the possibility of peace and even of happiness—for those anger-maddened eyes had been his own.

HE woke upon a bed in a small white-walled room. It was too soon yet to try to think things over. So he consciously relaxed and contemplated such immediate and basic pleasures as breathing and

observing the distant sun-gilt eucalyptus through the single broad window. For the present, the experience of life itself was sufficient.

When at last an attendant entered, followed by a nurse, Tom felt like talking. He was frustrated in this by a thermometer, which the woman allowed to remain in his mouth throughout the entire check-up. When she had finally concluded her routine, Tom said: "I'm feeling pretty good, doctor. Is it all right if I leave?"

"I'm just a mere psychotechnician," the man smiled. "You'll have to check with Miss Laughton."

"Fit as a fiddle," the nurse responded, gathering up her equipment.

"My bayonet wound okay?" Tom asked anxiously, and was immediately startled to find he could refer to the incident with amusement.

"It is if you can talk about it," she replied with a flicker of sympathy on her dry expressionless face.

"So it was a bayonet," the man commented after the nurse had left. "That's quite rare, you know. Usually it's a bullet or a shell fragment."

"Don't you decide—I mean, don't you set it all up beforehand?"

"Oh, no. Electrohypnosis merely

instigates certain motivational and situational patterns. The instrumentation and environment is entirely the product of your own personality. The more feasible, consistent and coherent the subjective aspects, the more adaptable, rational and stable must be the subject."

"What about the bayonet?"

"You chose that, I would suppose, because you not only weren't afraid of meeting the enemy, but actually wanted to. We'll go into that later. Now I want you to relate everything you can remember."

Tom waited while the other set up a recorder. It took less than twenty minutes to narrate every detail he could recall.

"Well that'll be enough for today. We do want you to report back in a week or so, just to find out how this affects your normal activities. The receptionist will make an appointment for you. Your clothes are in the closet."

Tom dressed and started along the corridor, stopping only once for a brief glimpse of the machine which had been his battleground. A boy he had seen occasionally at school was approaching, and they nodded at one another.

"You been through it?" the boy asked.

"Yeh," Tom told him, a little uneasily.

"I'm just going in. How is it?" Tom noticed the other boy's collar was damp with perspiration and his eyes were somewhat watery. "Is it pretty rough?"

"Well, it's — " Tom returned uncomfortably. "It's just like war."

HE turned away as the other winced and swallowed nervously. The receptionist made his appointment and he strode to the doorway. Already the horrors of a mere hour before seemed years in the past, and he wondered, as he proceeded down the steps into the same bright day he had left so long ago, how those vague and distant imaginings could possibly affect his future behavior. He readily admitted that he would be far less inclined to defend the concept of war than he would have been earlier. But surely it was possible that, under certain conditions, he might find himself in a situation where he had no alternative to violence. Those who had been through it never seemed to get into fights like other kids did, but that could be simply a matter of growing up.

Then why, he wondered, was electrophynosis universally required and the keystone of the armistice which had concluded the Third World War? With the exception of a few thoroughly socialized individuals whose capacity for

occasional force was necessary to the maintenance of law and order, every male human being of fifteen underwent the experience. So there must be some aspect of its consequences which he had overlooked.

For some reason a memory of three small boys playing soldier on an autumn dusk slipped in among his thoughts. How disenchantedly different had been the unreal realism of the dream. With an amused start it occurred to him that the same genuine Captain America Infrared Electronic Sniperkit that had seen him through those childhood skirmishes had accompanied him into combat that morning. And for an instant he wondered if such a thing as an infrared flare actually did exist.

Stepping onto the sidewalk, he turned toward home. He would be there in just a little over three hours after his parents had left him. They could not have worried too much in so short a period. Still, he decided, it would be best to call them. Everyone had heard rumors of subjects coming out of electrohypnosis with psychosomatic or neurotic after effects. And, while these had been authoritatively discounted, it would be typical of his mother to imagine her son the exception.

There was a drugstore on the next corner and Tom headed to-

ward it. He did not notice the two younger school acquaintances until they had crossed the street and halted in his path. He had never been on cordial terms with either of them, and was in no mood for their banter today.

"Well, look who's back from the wars!" the more aggressive of the pair exclaimed. "Where's your medals, Colonel?"

"Yeah!" the other gibed. "And what happened to your crutches?"

Tom regretted very much not having left the building by a rear exit. Their reaction to meeting him in that manner, considering their determination not to exhibit any anxiety over their own imminent ordeals, was bound to be antagonistic. However, his own responses had not yet stabilized adequately following the experience to permit much tolerance. He ignored them and started on.

"Come on, Tom," the first persisted, stepping swiftly into his path. "Tell us about it. How many of 'em did you get?"

"Bet he didn't get any. Bet he just buried himself in his foxhole till it was all over. Bet he was scared stiff."

"Naw, not the Colonel. He was out there in front all the time. Weren't you, Colonel?"

Irritation flamed into anger. Raising his hand, he was about to

push them aside when the hot searing pain of the bayonet struck him, hurling him back against the wall. For an uncomprehending moment he leaned immobile, his mouth gaping, his eyes awed. Then, realizing the only way out, he relaxed. The agony subsided and vanished. So *that* was it, he thought bitterly. So *that* was the ultimate weapon — not the indoctrination. For the rest of his life he was to be burdened with the possibility of that vivid torture whenever he so much as considered using force.

The boys had backed away apprehensively, and now were moving on down the street with frequent backward glances. It made no difference to him. For the present, they were of another age, an age of violence, an age which he had outgrown.

The drugstore was crowded, but Tom made his way toward the rear without noticing the customers. His thoughts were soberly and intently focused on the future. Perhaps, he considered, by the time his great grandchildren were men a way of life would have been created which involved neither the inevitability of war nor the alternate necessity for an invisible, poised bayonet. And so far as his own life was concerned, if the latter meant that he could return home, instead of trudging back to the barracks, then he accepted it gracefully. The price of peace was bound to be high, he reflected, since man had never before been able to afford it.

Sliding into the phonebooth and pushing a coin into the slot, Tom began dialing.

THE END

Featured next month in IMAGINATION:—

What is the truth behind the FLYING SAUCERS?

— Read GEOFF ST. REYNARD'S gripping novel —

DON'T PANIC!

Flying Saucer reports continue to hit your daily newspapers. Are these reports a fantasy of mass hysteria? Or are they true? Here's as shocking a science fiction story as you will ever read. It is shocking because it COULD BE TRUE! We urge you to reserve your copy of the November IMAGINATION at your news-dealer. DON'T PANIC! may prove to be grim prophetic fiction!

The Cautious Invaders

by

Arthur Sellings

Before a planet was annexed, scouts had to explore and analyze its culture. Vraj and Gol were scouts — and Earth was the planet . . .

VRAJ lifted his gaze from the magazine and sighed. He passed the magazine to his companion.

"Look at that, Gol. If this is a specimen of the reasoning of the race we have to deal with, it's going to be a pushover."

Although he came from a system two hundred light years from Earth, and was speaking to a fellow-Antibian, he said just that. He called it a pushover. The two of them had been conversing in this intolerably clumsy tongue all the way here. It was part of the plan. There must be no mistakes, no slipping back in an unguarded moment into their native tongue. Their work must go as efficiently as the first scouting expedition's had.

Vraj reflected that three years ago an Antibian ship had landed here and phased into invisibility. A raiding party had picked up two

living specimens of the dominant race, together with a collection of carefully selected books. The expedition had remained just long enough to be sure that their thefts had gone unnoticed. Or, at least, unattributed to any super-normal intervention. The planet's press reported a mysterious fire at a book-store, and two names were added to the list of missing persons. The world had gone on, unaware that it had had visitors, while the visitors made off back to Antib with their booty.

"You see," said Vraj, pointing to the crude drawing, "the man is hanging up a hammock, a kind of bed made of twine. He has attached one end to a tree. Only now is the stupid fool looking for a tree to tie the other end to. *And there isn't one there.*" He smiled smugly. "It is obviously a case of the most primitive reasoning."

Gol turned the magazine over as if looking for a clue to such unreasonable behavior. "Yes, it's certainly primitive. But we must be careful not to judge too hastily. The picture might be a demonstration in visual terms of the dangers of faulty reasoning. Something in the nature of a lesson in logic."

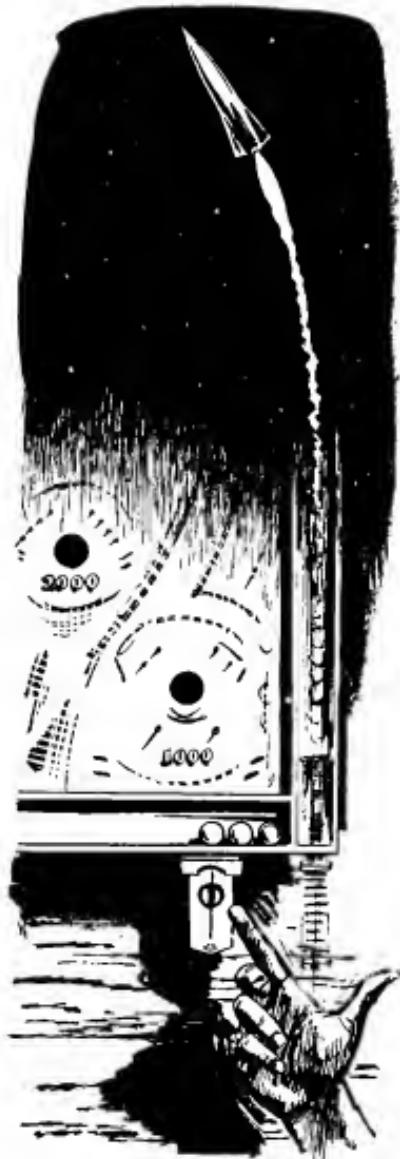
"At *that* level? That just proves what I was saying. If a race needs such an elementary lesson, even for its backward members, it must be shockingly inept."

"Yet they have flying machines."

"Of a kind."

"Truly. I'm not denying they seem a primitive species. But I can't help feeling that that picture is slightly out of key. It's like one or two other things we've learned about them. They're surprisingly advanced in some things . . . for a primitive culture that is. And surprisingly backward in others."

"Their ways of waging war, for instance." Vraj raised his hands. "It's like being back at school, studying our own culture of the distant past. I know it's illogical, but I can't get over the feeling that because we've developed to such a high level, then every race should have by now. That a chaotic, sprawling race like this one should be existing *now*, is like an anachronism, an insult to the intelligence of



IMAGINATION

the universe. I shall be glad when our report is done with, and the occupation squads move in in force."

Gol raised a cautioning finger. "Let us not anticipate, Vraj. Remember Shervin Nine."

VRAJ squirmed irritably. "You are always going on about Shervine Nine." The memory of it rankled. Like Earth it had been one of the few planets ideally suited for taking over by Antib. It had been just as green, its skies as blue and friendly. Its inhabitants had been little peaceful furry animals. The report had gone back. The squads had moved in. *And been blasted out of existence.* The little peaceful furry animals had remained. The Antibians had never been able to explain that one. They gave Shervin a wide berth now.

"All right. So we don't know everything," he growled. "But we haven't found a race yet to come near our record of achievement. Our creative achievement, that is," he added hastily, remembering the Shervin debacle.

"True, true," Gol observed cautiously. "But we of all people should know by now the strange shapes that life takes, the strange ways of thinking, developing. We may have gone through the Earth books with a toothcomb, but we

can never be sure what might be hiding under the surface. After all, that's the purpose of our mission now."

"All right," Vraj growled again. "Don't preach."

"That list of words, for instance," Gol continued suavely. "The ones we just don't have any equivalent for. Not even a circumlocution. The word *laugh*, for instance."

"Pah! A simple matter, a crude reflex action when certain parts of the human anatomy are slightly stimulated. I've read Vint's paper on it." He shuddered at the memory of it, the grossness of such a race.

"But it isn't only physical," Gol insisted. There's also a link with *humor*, another word on the list. And that is a mental process, as far as we can determine. Some irrational way of apprehending and stating truth. It might have something to do with the illogicality of that drawing, for instance."

Vraj snorted. "How can truth be apprehended illogically? I think your fears are warping your own logical processes."

"Not fear, Vraj. Caution, that's all."

A warning light flashed on the control panel.

"Approaching atmosphere," said Vraj, turning to the instruments.

He made the necessary adjustments with a practiced hand. As he reached over to a switch on the far side of the panel he felt the roughness and constriction of the Earth clothes he was wearing. "By the seven suns of Sufa, but I'll be glad to get out of these ridiculous clothes. And get this wig off, and this pigment out of my skin." He sent the ship into a graceful curve.

It came down, like a night-colored snowflake, on the dark side of the planet . . .

ONCE down, they phased the ship into invisibility and made for a nearby city.

Nobody gave them a second glance as they walked along a street. It was evening, but they would have passed the closest scrutiny even in daylight. They were equipped down to the last detail —papers, money, everything. Even their suits bore the labels of New York tailors.

"I'm only hesitant about our voices," said Gol as they strolled along. "There's bound to be some slight trace of accent."

Vraj shrugged. "It's not to be wondered at, is it? It's such a crude language. But have no fears. This is a big country. Many people come here from other lands to live, and they speak the language with a stronger accent than any

we could have."

"True. It's only a passing feeling. Where do we go?"

"We'll just walk around, acclimating ourselves. If we see anything interesting from a technological aspect we'll investigate. Look, for instance. There's a cinema." The word was a familiar one. They had read about cinemas. "Shall we?"

"Why not?" said Gol, feeling emboldened by the confidence of his companion.

It was their first test and they passed it perfectly. Their money was taken without question. Nobody looked at them curiously. Vraj even said, "Thank you," to the girl behind the grille. She smiled and said "You're welcome." It was too easy.

They didn't stay long inside. The pictures on the screen were crude and told them nothing new about the ways of this people. Gusts of that senseless laughter punctuated the proceedings at frequent intervals until the two aliens became bored with the stupidity of it. They rose from their seats after half an hour of it and went out again into the night air. Their stride had an air of complete confidence now. Vraj began thinking of what a pleasant world this would be to live in. Cleared, that is, of the rubble of its present occupants.

The air smelt sweet and good. There were, it was true, overtones in it that made his nostrils wrinkle—crude exhaust gases from the primitive oil-burning engines of this race's ground transport, acrid smoke from the fossil plants they used for fuel. But beyond these the air was as sweet as *lebani* wine. Once get rid of these uncouth creatures who polluted their own planet, and it could be made into a paradise. For a moment he felt a twinge of something like pity for them. After all, he thought, they're not so different from us to look at. But he dismissed the thought from his mind without effort. They'd had their chance, and muffed it. The stupid always had to give place to the wise. It was a law of the universe.

Gol broke in upon his reverie, clutching at his sleeve.

"Look, Vraj, a factory."

Vraj followed the direction of his gaze. He could see, through an open doorway, men bent over machines, intent upon their labors. He could make out other figures, supervisors evidently, moving among them scrutinizing their work.

"Let's have a closer look," said Vraj. "That should put to rest any fears you may have left. Remember the words of Cador: 'Know a culture by the processes of its 'manufacture.'"

They crossed over.

"What a noise!" exclaimed Gol.

"It's one of the recent developments of this planet," said Vraj smugly and contemptuously. "They pipe this cacophony into the ears of the operatives. It takes their minds off the monotony of their work."

THEY stood surveying the scene through the doorway.

"Let's go in," suggested Vraj.

"But the guards. They're sure to have guards."

"We can try, anyway. If someone stops us we can say we made a mistake. Or even," and he clapped Gol on the shoulder, "ask for a job."

Vraj's confident bravado dispelled Gol's caution, and he followed Vraj in.

"There you are," said Vraj serenely. "Security is as inefficient as everything else on this planet."

A man in a brown coat, evidently one of the inspectors, looked at them, but turned away without querying their presence there.

Gol felt a twinge of returning fear.

"It's too easy," he whispered. "I don't like it."

"It's all right," said Vraj. "Let's look at one of the workers."

They looked over the shoulder of one who was operating a tong-

like instrument in a glass case. As they watched him, he moved the tongs with great care. But somewhere in the process he seemed to make a mistake. His shoulders drooped, and the two onlookers heard him swear.

"I don't wonder he was annoyed," said Vraj as they moved on. "Did you see the sheer crudeness of those tongs and remote control mechanism. People shouldn't handle radioactives with such clumsy implements."

"Is that what he was doing?"

"Obviously," said Vraj airily. "Now what's this one up to?"

They didn't spend much time with this one. His work was obviously even more rudimentary than the last one's. He was checking numbers on a revolving drum, as periodically the drum stopped.

"A primitive type of computer," said Vraj.

They passed on. They came to one operative who seemed extremely intent on his work. He was a big specimen of this race, tall and broad, and as they approached him his bulk hid his machine. They saw only that his shoulders moved in some complicated manipulative process.

Then they saw the machine. Gol stared at it, incapable of believing his eyes at first. He felt the hairs on his neck bristling. He turned

to Vraj with a look of sudden panic. "Mars!" he whispered hoarsely. "That's the fourth planet of this system. *Mars Flight*, it says. This isn't a factory. It's a space flight control room!"

Vraj's bravado had deserted him. He looked as fearful as Gol felt. "But—but there's nothing in the books about it."

"And look at that," said Gol, pointing and gulping.

Vraj looked. The next machine was labelled *STARFLIGHT*. Lights flashed across the control board, lights whose pattern he couldn't decipher. So these people had space travel! Interstellar travel even! The thought of Shervin Nine and its gentle furry animals returned to fill him with panic. He looked around wildly.

And one of the inspectors was approaching them, a stern look on his face.

"Quick, Gol." Vraj went to take Gol's arm to steer him out of the place. But Gol needed no prompting. They marched quickly out, fearing a hand on their shoulders, fearing they would have to unholster the weapons that were reserved for such an emergency.

But no hand moved to restrain them. They walked out of the control room and out of the town. As soon as they were in open country they broke into a run. They were

panting when they reached their ship. They rephased it, climbed in and shot away.

Vraj was still trembling at the memory of it as, well clear of the system, he made out his report. He felt sick and ashamed. Gol kept looking at him with an air that plainly said "I told you so." With difficulty he started his report:

To the Colonizing Office

Antib

Antib 5/73L497

Report on Planet 3: Definitely a bivalent, or even multivalent culture. Stopped only to ascertain that they have space travel, and of a developed type. Advise absolute avoidance of such a cryptic civilization—

He chewed at the end of his stylus, wondering what to say next. Back on Antib they weren't going

to be pleased about the failure of this expedition. His words must be chosen carefully . . .

ON Earth a certain Joe Shmaltz was having no such difficulty in making *his* report. He took off his brown coat, crossed to his desk and wrote angrily:

Dear Al,

Look, you just got to send me some new models. Business has been lousy for two weeks now. Tonight was just about the limit. Two prosperous looking guys stroll in, take a look around, and don't play one pinball machine. Not one. Either you send me some real action getters inside three days, and I mean action, or I give my trade to Louie. Get me?

Yours disgustedly

Joe.

* * *

★ *Atom Bomb In Space!* ★

STUDYING nuclear fission is one of physics' most difficult tasks. Atomic reactions take place in micro-seconds and by the time the observation has started the action is over. It's hard to learn what's happening in a millionth of a second!

As a result physics turns to as-

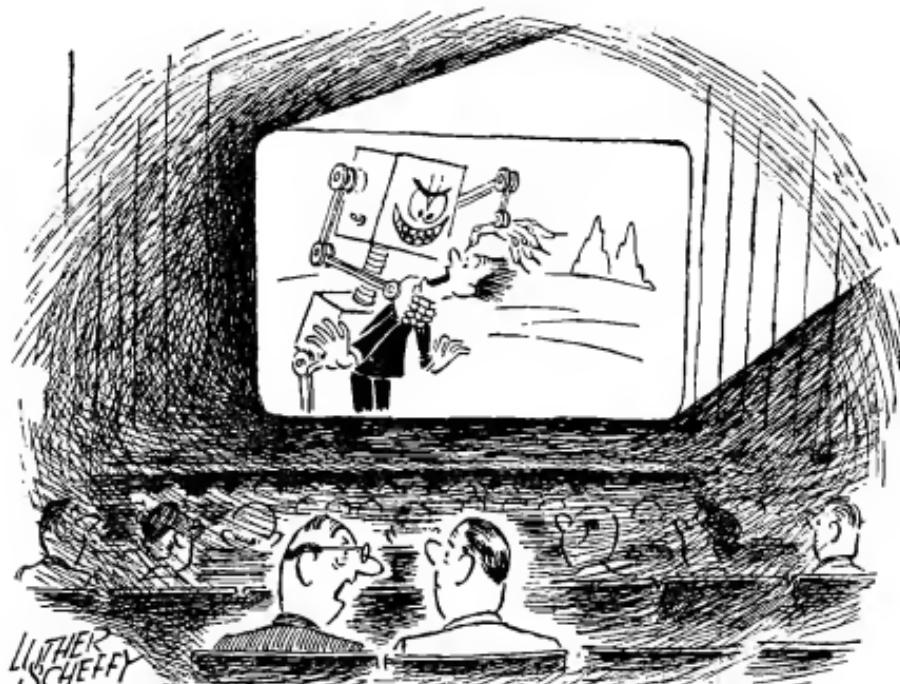
tronomy for assistance. It is a known fact that our Sun is little more than a gigantic atomic furnace, and it is ready to provide reams of data on the nature of atomic fission. Already facts about the new-developed hydrogen bomb have been derived from Sun-study.

But astronomers have shown ex-

amples of phenomena even more akin to the atomic bomb than ordinary suns. A true "atomic" explosion occurs whenever a "nova" is created. For many centuries men have noticed ordinary stars suddenly bursting into unaccountable brilliance. Only recently was it realized that these "nova" occurrences are the actual explosion of a star, a case where nuclear fission takes place with uncontrolled, unbalanced fury, exactly as in the atomic bomb.

The result is that nuclear physicists are turning to the astronomical study of novae to get a picture

of what goes on in an atomic bomb. The difference is that they're witnessing an explosion which stretches over centuries and millenia of time, a furious reaction which except for the vast distances involved would be over in a matter of fractional seconds. A nova is an atomic bomb in space, spreading its action over such a long time that for Earthly scientists, it is like having a slow motion picture of what goes on in the nucleus of an atomic explosion. It's no accident that physicists are haunting observatories, or that telescope building goes on at a furious pace!



"Wait till you see the guy he works for!"



The Day They Came

By

Len Guttridge

Danny felt left out of things when the visitors from space arrived. Being crippled he couldn't even go to Capitol City to see them . . .

DANNY slung the filling pump nozzle on its hook and watched the car flash northwards. In the rippling heat haze it shivered like a fish before vanishing.

That would be the last of them, he figured. Some pilgrimage. Jeeps, jalopies, hot-rods and hardtops. Eager kids his own age, county politicians and the military. There'd

even been a pair of clergymen wearing oddly confused expressions.

All headed for Capital City.

"Fill 'er up, Danny boy. Can't run out of gas today . . ."

"Hi, Danny. Some fun, eh?" (a little uneasily, this) "What you think they'll look like?"

"You should be on the reception committee. Stuff you read, you're an authority, son . . ."

"Too bad you can't make it, Danny . . ."

"Bye, Danny. Say hello to your mom. . ."

Chatter of excitement with a thread of fear running through it. But they were right, he should be in Capital City today. Of all days.

Instead he felt deserted in the warm shell of afternoon from which, it seemed, all life had been sucked. Cattle in the fields, desperate for shade, crouched unseen beneath hedges. Overhead, no bird sang, no cloud drifted. In the store back of him his mother rested. Everything that moved had gone north.

"Except me." The pang left a burning at his eyes. He swallowed, tapped the brace on his leg with a wooden crutch and hobbled towards the store. Then he stopped.

"Me and Pete, that is."

On the steps a small man dozed. His mouth curved downwards as if he doubted his dream. But his hands were clasped and his white hair moved thinly though there wasn't a hint of breeze.

Danny grimaced. "Of all days to sleep in the sun."

And with two good legs, he thought. He found himself wishing for a crazy miracle to switch limbs, his withered one for Pete's, just for today so —

Under the white hair one eye opened. It stared at Danny and was

followed by the other.

The boy flushed. "Thought you were sleeping."

"I never sleep."

"Oh, sure."

"I only doze. That's when I'm widest awake." He stretched. "Leg botherin' you?"

"You kidding?" Danny went into the store. He emerged with a paper-covered book and lowered himself beside Pete. It took some effort. His imprisoned leg stuck out beyond the steps.

Pete studied the book's cover. His skepticism deepened. "Twin-headed things with seven legs apiece." He snorted. "Think the artist who did *that* is in Capital?"

"Everyone is."

"Wonder how he'll feel if them visitors look like himself? Silly, I bet."

"The odds are against it."

Pete chuckled. "Just as well, maybe."

Danny said nothing. So it was the biggest day in history. Nothing could shake Pete's composure. It exasperated at times, often earned him a verbal cuffing. He'd only grin.

Pete was a country wanderer, more philosophical and hygienic than most. He'd shown up a year ago just after Danny's leg . . . well, he lived in a shack down the road and ate at the store. In re-

turn he did chores Danny's mother shouldn't do and Danny no longer could.

He had other uses. Summer evenings, for instance, when the kids would drift past and thoughtlessly yell an invitation to join them for a swim in Mason's Pool. Danny would shake his head more vigorously than was needed and watch them across the meadow. Sometimes he couldn't see them clearly.

ALWAYS, when the hurt got too deep, he'd find Pete at his elbow. Pete would talk. Ordinary gab mostly. Of the goings-on at Barnett's Cabins keeping him awake nights. Of the paint job he'd one day get around to giving the store. Of Farmer Mason's dire bulletins on the state of the crops and wasn't it time them scientists fixed things so it would rain when we wanted it?

Danny would reach for a book. A book about strange worlds and creatures no earthly eyes ever saw. Pete's drone would fade and the hot gasoline and grocery smells would fade. Reality became the beings of light-years away and eons hence. He shared their perils and their marvels. And he forgot the cage on his leg.

Thus ignored, Pete would keep talking.

"You still here?" Danny would

say later. Pete was darned *dull* after those transgalactic trips. But beneath his banter Danny was grateful. There weren't enough stories. Pete was necessary when the space realm emptied.

Until today. Nothing could stem the frustration today. Even his private interstellar companions had fled the imagination, were henceforth nothing but dead words. For *they* had landed. Up in Capital City the nation's leaders had rehearsed a nervous welcome. Today *they* were expected to leave their vessel. Today. This afternoon.

The landing area was heavily militarized, of course. Just in case.

"Always knew they'd come," said Danny. "Guess I always dreaded it, too. Long as they were in books they were sort of—mine."

Abruptly he hurled the book into the empty road.

His mother came out. "Anything wrong, son?"

"Boy's sore," Pete said looking at Danny. "It's a big day up in Capital. Least most folks think so. Danny would like to be there. Only natural."

"You wouldn't see anything, son. All police and soldiers. No one'll get to see anything."

"It's being there."

"So? Them whatever-they-are, they haven't come to see the likes of us."

"All right. I know."

"It's the generals they'll want to meet. And the politicians." Her voice hardened. "Them with power. The poor folks, the weak, they've nothing for *them*."

She'd never sounded so bitter. For her sake he brightened. "Like county-fair time for the pumps, though. They're still hot."

His mother said. "Took nigh the end of the world to make it so."

She went indoors.

Pete said, "Radio not working?"

"No. Tube, I guess. Never get one today, that's for sure." Did he really want the radio fixed? Hearing and not being there might be worse than silence.

On this day that was unlike any day which had happened or ever would again, the sun was disappointingly normal. It swung down behind Mason's blue-coned farmhouse and its pink wake flooded the earth like wine.

DANNY scanned the road for a returning car. "Guess it's over by now. They lighted on red carpet and the big boys made speeches and shook their—hands. Some show, I bet."

His lips trembled.

Pete said, "Big boys. Maybe they didn't come to see the big boys."

"Ma seemed to think so."

"She said they've come to meet the strong. Depends what you mean by strong."

"No riddles, Pete."

"Two tough arms, stout legs, mental cunning. That's strong? Those characters from out there may have different ideas. Especially if they have different shapes." His lips twitched.

"Thought you didn't believe—"

"No, I don't. Anyway, shapes don't mean much. Know what I think? I think that after they've taken a quick sightsee, they'll want to meet the true strength on this world of ours. And where will they find it?"

"You tell me, Pete."

"Not in muscles or guns and governments. In the back streets maybe. In lonely, old guys. In women with threadbare shawls. In hospitals. Or in a kid who manages to grin. Despite this."

He tapped Danny's brace. The sharp touch made Danny's leg tingle. Danny colored.

"Lay off, Pete."

"Sure." Pete stood up. "All the same, words like strong and weak might mean a little different in future. You'll see."

He walked to the edge of the road, a frail silhouette. Danny, disturbed by an unexpected sadness in the little man's eyes, limped after

him.

"Pete. Pete . . ."

Pete grasped his hand tightly, just once. "Time to go," he said softly. He merged with the falling dusk.

Half a mile up the road a car's lights glimmered. It swooped past. Behind it another braked wildly by the pumps. The occupants all talked at once.

"Like us, Danny, they're just like you an' me . . ."

"They came to help us—like they have other planets. They say they can cure all disease . . ."

"Terrific, isn't it, Danny? They're arranging things with our government right now . . ."

"Tour of hospitals will start next week . . ."

"In search of the strong," Danny whispered.

"What's that, Dan? What's that you say?"

More cars appeared. A jubilant uproar now.

"And how about those guys, Danny? They've had advance agents planted among us for ten years. Testing our strength, one of 'em put it, to see if we were worth contacting. Yeah, secret agents . . . they were never spotted . . . their jobs are done now, they're being re-

called . . . Hey, where you going, Dan?"

Danny's leg was tingling much more now. The crippled leg in the brace, the useless leg, tingling—where Pete had touched it.

Suddenly Danny was running, fast as any man with two good legs he dashed into the house. "Mother! I've got to find Pete—I know who he is—I know where he came from!"

His mother stared at him in happy amazement. "Danny—your leg—you're *walking!* . . ."

He laughed, his young eyes bubbling with a new life. "That's it, mom—it was Pete—I've got to find him . . ."

She took Danny into her arms hungrily. "Pete'll be back soon, Danny. He always comes back, you know that."

But Danny knew somehow that she was wrong. Pete wouldn't be back. His job was done, now . . .

Danny's leg tingled with its new strength. And his heart tingled with strength too. The strength of knowledge. He left his mother's arms and walked proudly to the window. The day was bright and warm and wonderful outside.

It was a new world. And, Danny knew, a very happy one.

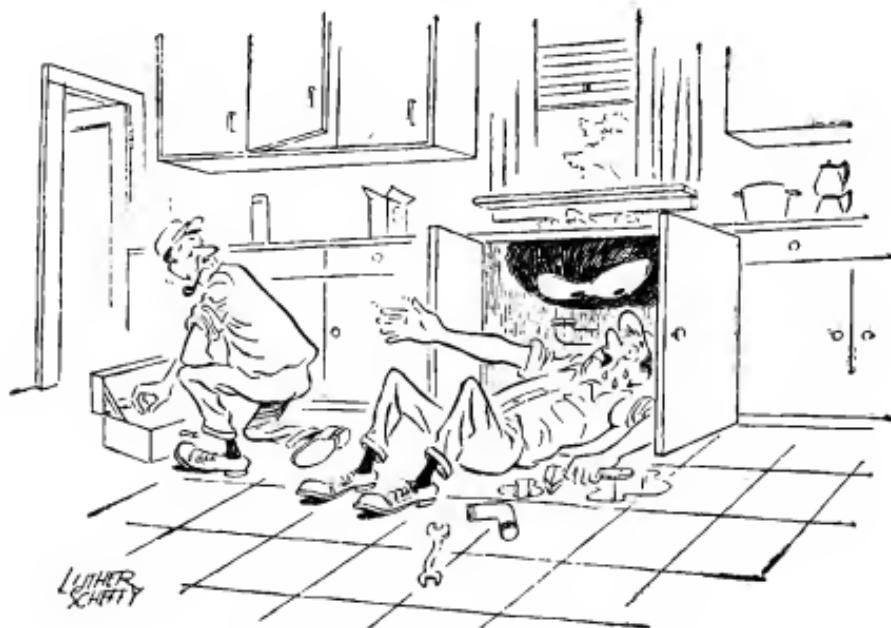
★ — And Then There Were None — ★

MAKING a perfect vacuum is an impossibility, scientists will tell you. By taking a leaf from Nature's own book however, the lab boys have invented a new kind of vacuum pump which will take almost every last molecule of gas from any kind of a container. This vacuum pump, which can be called the "pump of the future" uses no moving parts.

It has been known for a long time that electrified molecules (ions) are attracted to electrically charged plates. Neon tubes, fluor-

escent lamps, even the Aurora Borealis, make use of this effect. Why not apply it to a vacuum system?

With a special electronic bombarder, the gas molecules in the container to be emptied are charged with a positive or negative charge. As they are swept by oppositely charged plates, they are attracted and held—like magic, an almost perfect vacuum! Step by step, science nears perfection, for the creation of a good vacuum, is one of the keys to tremendous progress in all scientific fields.



"Hand me that great big wrench, Joe."

**Ruskin didn't like archeologists; they
were always digging up problems from the past.
Like the day Bigelow walked in and announced —**

Earth's Gone To The Dogs!

by

William J. McClellan

RUSKIN leaned back and yawned — the porch chair creaked comfortably. It was a comfortable day. Fifty yards away the barnyard was alive with Spring noises. Clean crisp smells floated to him through the bright morning air.

Daisy walked slowly up and watched him with big affectionate eyes. Ruskin smiled down at her. She was a pretty one, pretty soft hair, deep blue eyes, lithe rounded lines.

“Nice doggie.”

He patted her head gently.

“Nice doggie,” he repeated.

Holidays in the country came too seldom.

The quiet was wonderful.

Tom, the wrinkled little farmhand, opened the porch door.

“Mr. Ruskin?”

“Yes, Tom.”

“Man here to see you.”

“Who?”

“That digger fellow.”

Ruskin frowned and swore quietly. Even his holidays were shattered by people who couldn't forget he was Commissioner of Internal Security. And these people were always little unimportant ones, like this archeologist Bigelow, whose little fears suddenly became giant threats to national security.

“Send him out here, Tom.”

Tom turned back into the house. Ruskin could hear his gruff voice inside, and a few moments later Bigelow, stooped and bespectacled emerged from the house.

Ruskin smiled weakly.

“Hello, Bigelow.”

“Good morning, Commissioner.”

Bigelow stood, clutching his briefcase, shaking with excitement. Then suddenly his eyes fell on Daisy and something like fear passed over his face.

“Sit down, Bigelow.”



Bigelow balanced himself delicately on the edge of a porch chair, his briefcase resting on his long bony knees. But his eyes remained fixed on the dog.

"Is this social or business, Bigelow?"

"Sort of both, Commissioner," he answered slowly. Then added quickly, "But I wouldn't disturb your holiday if it wasn't important."

Ruskin nodded dully.

Then several moments of silence during which Bigelow continued to watch Daisy carefully. Finally, since his visitor did not seem inclined to speak, Ruskin asked simply, "Well?"

"First tell the dog to go away."

"Daisy?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I won't say a word with *IT* here."

Ruskin shrugged.

"As you wish," he said. "Daisy . . . go . . . go on, like a good girl."

Daisy's big eyes seemed hurt but, reluctantly, she walked away.

BIGELOW watched suspiciously after her until she was well out of hearing.

"Now," he began, "a week ago we started digging around the crater on the East Coast where some great pre-Atomic cities once stood . . ."

Bigelow paused excitedly.

Ruskin sighed. It was much too nice a day . . .

" . . . and there we came upon THREE pre-Atomic books!"

Bigelow paused again.

"A wonderful find," Ruskin said, without enthusiasm.

"More wonderful than you think, Commissioner."

Bigelow squared his shoulders dramatically.

"Two of them were much like the other pre-Atomic books in the museums, but the third . . ."

Bigelow was bursting with excitement.

" . . . the third had pictures in it!"

Ruskin straightened up.

"Amazing!"

Never before had a pre-Atomic book been found with pictures. Artists had painted their own ver-

sions drawn from the few meager written descriptions. . .

"How many pictures, Bigelow?"

"Plenty, but just one would be enough to shake the foundations of our social world!"

He opened his briefcase and pulled out a small book protected by his own cloth cover. He opened to a marked page.

"Just take a look at this!"

Ruskin took the book and stared curiously at a picture showing a dressed up dog sitting in a chair patting a human on the head. The caption read: MAN'S BEST FRIEND GETS REWARD.

Ruskin glanced back at Bigelow.

"I don't understand," he said slowly. "Is it some kind of joke-book?"

Bigelow grinned narrowly.

"A very bitter joke, Commissioner. A joke of Mother Nature's".

"I'm still not sure I understand. . ."

"I think you do, Commissioner," Bigelow countered quickly. "Now so many of the things we couldn't understand become clear to us. The naked animal on the floor in the picture is our ancestor, and the hairless thing in the chair is our dog!"

Ruskin shook his head.

"Impossible!"

"Not at all! In the lower animal and plant orders more amazing mutations occurred during the Atomic Wars—we just never noticed because they didn't touch us closely."

Ruskin's mind rushed over the implications, all the frightful and carefully ignored aberrations of the Atomic blasts.

If it was true, and he still wouldn't let himself be convinced, it would be a tremendous blow to the morale of Society. And it was his duty to protect the well-being of Society. He must decide. . . now . . . for Society . . .

"This is a very delicate problem, Bigelow," he said finally.

"I know, Commissioner."

"You've come upon something . . . fantastic."

"Thank you, Commissioner."

"We must handle this very carefully."

"I understand."

"Good. Leave the book with me . . . for security reasons . . . and I'll figure how to handle it."

"Well . . ."

"Of course, I'll see that you get all the credit you deserve."

Bigelow rose.

"Very well, Commissioner. I'll leave it in your hands."

He left with the air of a man just conquering the world.

RUSKIN sat, the closed book in both hands, for a long long while. It was very late when he called the Psycho Section.

"Yes," Psycho answered. "We have a file on Bigelow."

"Have you ever interned him?"

"No. But he's catalogued as extremely unstable."

"Fine. Thank you."

Ruskin placed the receiver carefully back on the cradle. Nothing to fear from Bigelow. He rose and walked slowly toward the fire.

He looked down at the book.

War! War! War! From the beginning of man almost to his own destruction.

Since the Atomic Wars Earth had been comparatively peaceful —because, people thought, Man had become surfeited of war.

Ruskin frowned.

Attitudes, someone had once said, are more important than facts.

He dropped the book into the flames.

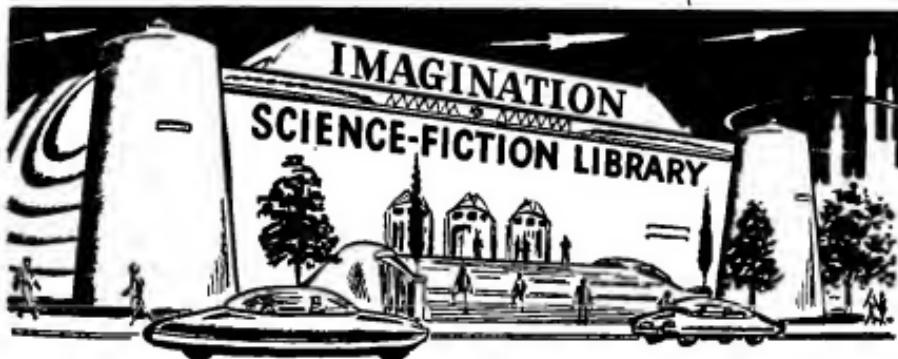
Very well, then.

Let Earth be happy.

Daisy walked slowly over to him and barked quietly. The pretty golden hair hung gently over her shoulders, and her blue eyes were very soft.

Ruskin patted her gently.

"Nice doggie," he said.



— REVIEWING CURRENT SCIENCE FICTION BOOKS —

Conducted by Henry Bolt

Hard cover science fiction is booming and many fine novels and anthologies are available at all bookstores or by writing direct to the publishers. Each month *IMAGINATION* will review several titles — candidly — as a guide to your book purchases.

1954 — YEAR'S BEST SCIENCE FICTION NOVELS

Edited by Bleiler and Dikty. \$8.50. 317 pages. Frederick Fell, Inc. New York, N. Y.

Five novels—and everyone good! Also a Bleiler-Dikty Introduction! One couldn't ask for more. I have no idea what motivates the publishers to bring out so many anthologies, but if they continue to do so with ones of this class, it's perfectly all right.

Philip Dick does "Second Variety", Crossen "Assignment to Aldebaran", Gold and Krepps, "The Enormous Room," Robinson, "The Oceans Are Wide", and Leinster "The Sentimentalists."

Robinson's effort reminds one of Heinlein's "Universe" with its subject matter and its evocative writing. The best story in the volume.

Dick's story is a grim, realistic

tale of the Third World War. It is so well written that to read the first paragraph is to read the story; you can't put it down.

Leinster's concerns colonists, but there is no hackneyed encroaching-alien theme. Simply perception and understanding by a different civilization.

Crossen's story is the weakest of the group. It is a not very different space opera, but space operas can be entertaining and this one is.

Merely start Gold and Krepp's story. After the description of the roller-coaster which comes back without its passengers — then try and put it down!

Don't let the word 'anthology' throw you on this book. It's well worth reading and it will give you your money's worth indeed.

PORTALS OF TOMORROW

Edited by August Derleth, 371 pages, \$3.75. Rinehart and Company, Inc. New York, N. Y.

While fantasy is not your reviewer's dish, it cannot be denied that there are good stories of fantasy. This anthology is a rich one. Blish, Bradbury, Clarke, Reynolds, and Simak among many others offer a delightful selection of fantastic stories.

Bradbury's "The Playground" reminds one of his "Pedestrian" and the subtle horror of a mythical children's playground leaves one with a chilled feeling.

Clarke's "The Other Tiger" is a compelling treatment of the old idea

of multiple worlds. What if Columbus had not discovered America? What if the Roman empire had not collapsed? And so on. But with grace and wit, Clarke takes this theme and in a brief story makes you feel as if you've read something.

In a science fiction world in which anthologies are spawned as rapidly as bacteria multiply, it is often difficult to preserve an objective view toward the hosts of books one encounters. A dip into an anthology of this caliber is indeed a refreshing and pleasing experience.

If you are bored with science fiction, if you're not a fantasy fan, try this treat introductory.

BEST FROM FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION — THIRD SERIES

Edited by Anthony Boucher and J. Francis McComas. 252 pages. \$3.25. Doubleday and Company. New York, N. Y.

This is a rich and intelligently compiled anthology. These stories are stories, literature and art first if you will, and science fiction afterwards. Naturally they are not all good, but the batting average is high and you won't go away disappointed. For my taste, I would have preferred a richer leavening of science and less fantasy, but still . . .

H. Nearing Jr.'s "The Maladjusted Classroom" carries Professor Ransom, mathematics instructor at an unknown university into another adventure where the Klein bottle and the Moebius strip have their day.

Charles Harness gives you the chilling "Child by Chronos." To

suggest its hideously captivating theme is to destroy it—read it!

Ann Warren Griffith's "Captive Audience" beautifully satirizes the husksters' world of commercials.

Alfred Bester's "Star Light, Star Bright" is an exercise in cold, chilling horror.

There are many other rewarding treats in this anthology which is really to be expected since Boucher and McComas are both crusaders with a message postulated on the axiom that fantasy and science fiction should be literate as well as anything else, a surprising attitude apparently in many places in the field.

Oddly enough the most disappointing—the only disappointing—story in the lot is by Boucher. Perhaps this is to be expected. It is hard to pick 'em and write 'em!

For an evening or two of magic and enchantment, this book is it.



Conducted by Mari Wolf

LONG with the fanzines for this month's BOX I received a letter from Denis Moreen, the editor of *Spiral*, asking about the way zines are chosen for review. Lately other people have asked the same thing—I've been accused of everything from reviewing only fanzines from California to selecting them by the eenie-meenie-menie-mo system.

So I'll try to answer some of the more frequently asked questions about what happens to a fanzine once it has been addressed to P. O. Box 230, Evanston, Illinois.

First off, the complaint: "I sent you my fanzine three months ago and you haven't reviewed it yet. Why?"

All right. It probably reached me about three weeks after you mailed it. I don't live in Illinois, but in California, and Bill Hamling forwards the fanzines to me a couple of

times a month, in big bundles. This is about the only practical way of my being sure I get them all, as I have moved about half a dozen times since I first opened the BOX.

The fanzine you mailed in May will probably be reviewed in the column I write in June. The review goes to Evanston. It gets edited, goes to the typesetters, proofreaders, printers, distributors. It turns up on the stands about September.

So you see a delay of at least three months is just about inevitable, under the best conditions.

Another common bone of contention is this one: "I sent you the first issue of my fanzine and you didn't review it. Why?" This one is asked even if, perhaps especially if, I've reviewed every issue from number two or three on.

The answer goes back to the question of how a fanzine comes to be selected for review. There is one

basic criterion. It is my own personal opinion as to whether the zine is worth it—whether it's legible, fairly well written, and not too obviously overpriced.

A lot of new fanzines are very poor. Many beginning editors have trouble with their mimeoing or dittoing, and the result is a bundle of pages whose faint grey or purple hentracks can scarcely be deciphered into words. If the zine is extremely hard to read it won't be reviewed, no matter how good the material in it may be. I've started stories or articles in some fanzines and found them so nearly illegible that I quit reading in exasperation; I don't see how I could recommend them to someone paying ten or fifteen cents for the privilege of trying to decode them.

The fanzine doesn't have to be a work of art. It doesn't need justified margins or high quality paper or the best grade of mimeograph—though these features help make it attractive and add decidedly to its customer appeal. If the reproduction is somewhat faulty I'll review it—but if it's illegible I won't.

Many times a first issue is substandard, but subsequent ones show rapid improvement. I don't like to review a sloppy zine. Sometimes a brand new one shows talent and I'll give it a good sendoff, even though it's pretty raggedy. I'll usually say that it should improve, and almost always it does improve, if it lasts.

If there is a choice between two fanzines, both of average quality, one that I've reviewed several times in the past and one that I've never seen before, I'll usually re-

view the one I know. This may not seem fair. But there is often an air of impermanence about new fanzines; you look at them and find yourself wondering if they'll ever see another issue. Now there's a big enough turnover among established fanzines so that I get a few sad letters from readers who've sent money in to an editor who has folded his mag and faded away, taking the subscription money with him. I like to feel that the zine I review this month will still be around three months from now.

I DON'T review oneshots, unless it's specifically stated that there are plenty of available copies, and then not unless the oneshot is of exceptional quality. I don't often review fanzines that are circulated only among the various amateur press societies and are hard to get hold of—the ones I do review are those that state they will sell additional copies to outside readers. In the case of a new fanzine, I would rather review a mag I'm fairly sure will still be available to the readers who request it than one that is a completely unknown quantity.

However, the zine I see for the second time I'm likely to review in preference to the one of equal merit that I reviewed only last month or so.

There are certain fanzines that can be depended on to be consistently good. These will be set aside automatically for review. However, the others will all be read. Maybe I don't read every word of some of the less excellent zines, but none are overlooked. Editors are

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very human, even fanzine review editors, and there's nothing more gratifying to a reviewer's soul than to discover new talent. A brand new fanzine, by fans whose names I've never heard before, will sometimes be the best or one of the best in the whole pile. And how happy it makes me to say so! (For instance, I had to rewrite the whole concluding section of one BOX to include the first issue of *Psychotic*, which arrived in a late batch of zines and would normally have been held over for inclusion in the next month's column.)

Some months I just can't review all the good fanzines I get. Sometimes there will be twenty-five or more zines that I normally would select for review. When this happens, I have to pick arbitrarily. I choose first the zines I consider exceptionally good. I choose next the zines I haven't reviewed in recent columns, including any new ones that are really promising. Those that have been frequently reviewed won't be included; I set them aside for the next issue. If newer issues of these set-aside zines come in during the next month I report on them; if not, I review the back copies, avoiding anything that will be too dated. In general, the zine the reader receives won't be the same issue I reviewed anyway.

Usually after a month when there have been a lot of fanzines there will be a month or two when there are fewer than usual, so it is rare if zines I really want to review get crowded out for long.

There are some fanzines that go issue after issue that I put off reviewing. I don't cover them because

I consider them less good than those I do cover. If they are new they often improve, and often they eventually join the list of those set aside to be reviewed automatically. Sometimes, though, they will never be reviewed. Why?

Very poor reproduction, which I've mentioned before, is one reason. Very poor writing is another. Now fanzine fiction can't be judged by professional standards, nor fanzine articles by journalistic ones. I've given good reviews to stories I thought were poor from any literary standpoint, but which had interesting ideas or showed talent in the young writer. But much fan fiction is very bad indeed. It is not only semi-illiterate, but boringly so. And quite a bit of non-fiction is almost as bad.

Many of these very poor fanzines are turned out by sincere but very young fans. I'd rather give them no reviews than slam them. I don't like to give a really bad review to anyone except the fan who comes out and asks for it by announcing to fandom as a whole that he's the best, if not the only, editor in the field, and that everyone else should agree with him.

It's hard to say just what makes me decide whether or not to review a specific zine. Sometimes it's a matter of space—if there's room I'll review it and if there isn't I won't, because I consider it more or less borderline. Sometimes it depends on the price asked; I'll review a fanzine that costs a dime whereas I wouldn't review one of the same size and quality that cost twenty cents. My main thought has to be that other people may buy ac-

cording to my recommendation. Naturally, a lot of times the buyer will be disappointed; tastes differ. But I don't want to feel that I've advised someone to waste money on something I don't consider worth the price. If I praised very poor zines, or illegible zines, or thin overpriced zines, it would react badly not only on the Box and on the particular zine, but on fanzines in general.

Sometimes a fairly promising fanzine will be published for one or two issues and then fold. I've been accused of not helping such zines get subscriptions, with the result that the editor gave up in despair. This, I think, is silly. In the first place, most regular readers of any fanzine are recruited from already active fans who already have access to new zines. Furthermore, publishing or writing of any kind is a hard and often discouraging task; if a person is so easily discouraged by lack of immediate recognition that he quits, he probably wouldn't last very much longer even with recognition.

A last word on how fanzines are selected for review. I don't pick just the ones I like particularly. I try to include all those I think may be of interest to different groups of readers—trading zines, newszines, poetry zines, cartoon zines and the like. (Some I like; others I'm indifferent to, personally.) But after all, I'm not reviewing them for myself, or even for their editors; I'm reviewing them for the readers, you who'll pay for them and enjoy them, and maybe plunge into the fannish world and start producing them too.

* * *

Now to this month's fanzines: FOG: 5c; Don Wegars, 2444 Valley St., Berkeley 2, Calif. Editor Wegars must absorb quite a financial beating on this one; it's true that fanzine publishing is far from a money making proposition at best, but at only a nickel . . . Well, in his editorial he says he judges fanzines by the number of cokes they will buy. One *Fog* equals one coke. Except where can you get anything, drinkable or readable, for less than seven cents any more?

After the editorial "Fog's Horn," comes Dick Geis' "Ceiling Zero." It's a column devoted this time to the efforts of fan Jim Bradley as he produces his first issue of *Lyric*. Ron Ellik's "The Cracker Barrel" discusses some of the differences between British and U. S. fandom—one of the chief ones being that many of the greatest fans in Britain are pros, whereas in this country there is usually a much sharper cleavage between amateur and professional. (Bob Tucker and Bob Bloch notwithstanding.)

Fog is a very good ditto job. Its covers are simple and uncluttered. It's a most readable zine, not the best in the field, but better all the time. And certainly the best buy in its price range.

* * *

ALPHA: Jan Jansen, 229, Berchemlei, Borgerhout, Antwerp, Belgium. Subscriptions for this first Belgian fanzine, a bimonthly, are 60c a year in United States mint stamps, which seems to work out to a dime's worth an issue. (But if you want just one copy I'd suggest you send more than a dime—

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it's hard enough operating on a shoestring in the US, and when practically all your fan friends live at least as far away as England . . .)

Jan Jansen and Dave Vendelmans, also of Antwerp, are the coeditors of this very amusing fanzine. It is, as far as I know, the first zine put out in Continental Europe. It's in English—a lot better English than that used by some US fans I can think of, but not a bit stuffy or bookish.

There's a report on the upcoming "Twerpcon," or Antwerp Convention, that sounds like a riot. (I wouldn't suggest you plan to attend though. It also sounds imaginary.) There's Dave "Vendy"'s story of the man-who-encounters-the-BEM, "Meet Me Tonight in Dreamland." A clever satire of the alien-human relationship.

This is a very readable fanzine I'm sure you'll like. And if you're looking for overseas fan-friends, here's where you can get acquainted.

* * *

FANTASTIC WORLDS: 30c; quarterly; Sam Sackett, 1428½ S. Bundy Dr., Los Angeles 25, Calif. This photo-offset fanzine publishes some very good off-trail fiction and articles. Its artwork is excellent; it's one of the best looking fan publications on the amateur market. The only thing against it is its price—you wouldn't hesitate at a quarter, but thirty cents is so nearly the price of the professional magazines . . . Still, FW is far more readable than almost any two fifteen centers.

As a "little" magazine this one

is a fine example of off-trail publishing. The issue I have here contains Paul Preger's "An Experiment in Hallucination," a story billed as being written in a certain literary style. Whether you agree with the billing or not I think you will like the story; it departs a long way from the main stream of modern fantasy or science fiction, back to an older period of the genre, but it does so well.

Bob Silverberg writes on Olaf Stapledon, particularly his "The Flames." His discussion of Stapleton as more a characterizer of alien philosophies than a fiction writer is, I think, provocative.

There's a complete book review section, a poem, "Edge of Infinity," by William Galbraith, a Mel Hunter cover and an unusual interior illustration by Jerri Bullock. If this is the type of amateur magazine you prefer, it's worth your thirty cents to sample FW.

* * *

CANADIAN FANDOM: 20c; quarterly; Gerald Steward, 166 McRoberts Ave., Toronto 10, Ontario, Canada. This fanzine has been around for a long time, since 1943 to be exact, though at times the issues have been few and far between. It's very active now however; if you're a Canadian fan yourself and haven't got in touch with this group you really should.

In the issue I have here Clyde Kennedy writes on "Ancient Man in Ontario," an account of the latest archeological findings on Maitoulin Island, in Lake Huron. Especially interesting to those with archeological or anthropological leanings, it's still sufficiently non-technical

for everyone to enjoy.

Betty Sullivan reports on the Cleveland area fans' plans to make it Cleveland in '55 for the World Science Fiction Convention. And Marvin Snyder concludes his account of "The Ancient and Mystical Order Rosae Crucis."

The mimeography on this one is very good, and the contents are varied and well worth reading.

* * *

ABSTRACT: 10c; monthly; Peter James Vorzimer, 1311 North Laurel Ave., W. Hollywood 46, Calif. The cover on the current *Abstract* is a very good lunar landscape by Ronnie Cobb. It's a photo-offset cover on a dittoed zine—and it makes a most attractive package.

There's a serial running, Don Howard Donnell's "Three Loves Had Michael." Usually there's nothing I dislike more than finding a serial in a fanzine, but this one is an exception. I hope I get the copy with the last installment. Donnell will probably be one of the fan-turned-pro writers any day now.

There are autobiographies by Joel Nydahl and Terry Carr, lots of letters and lots of interior color—purple, red, green, and blue ink yet. But one complaint—though the contents page lists things by page numbers, where are the numbers? None in my copy at all.

* * *

STARLANES: 40c; quarterly; Orma McCormick, 1558 W. Hazelhurst St., Ferndale 20, Mich. This "international quarterly of science fiction poetry" hardly belongs in the general classification of "fanzine," except that its subject matter is science fictional. It's a print-

ed booklet containing a wide variety of poems in a wide variety of styles. If you're interested in this medium I'm sure you'll like *Starlanes*. If you write science fiction or fantasy poetry yourself you might try submitting it here, too.

I fear I can't pick a favorite this time. Perhaps Garth Bentley's "Strange Talents." Or Harlan King Yostman's "Leaderless."

The price would be too high for a fanzine—but this really belongs in the "little" classification.

* * *

VAMP: 10c; John Magnus, Federal 203-B, Oberlin, Ohio. *SF* goes, and *Vamp* comes. In the first issue of this new zine editor Magnus explains the demise of *SF*, one of the top rated fanzines of seventh or any other recent fandom. He's undoubtedly right; keeping up a fanzine that requires a lot of work without presenting any new challenge can be just too much for an editor, especially since fanzine editing is supposed to be fun.

In *Vamp* Stan Woolston has an article on "The ABC of acquiring enemies." He recommends a good fan feud, only suggests that you feud with a fan's ideas, not with him personally. Heck, for a lot of people that would take all the fun out of it . . .

Ian McCauley does some Convention reporting; Henry Moskowitz looks at some aspects of the professional publishing field; and a lot of people do a lot of cartoons. Result: a new zine. Verdict: very readable, and definitely better than average for a new one, but it's really too soon to say. What sort of "unique personality" will

you give this one, John?

* * *

A LA SPACE: 20c; bimonthly; Kent Corey, Box 64, Enid, Oklahoma. This is what you might call a fanish fanzine. It makes no pretense of being arty, erudite, or belonging to the world's great literature, but it's something a fan at heart can read and enjoy. It's starting its second year of publication with the issue I have here, and it's changed a lot in its first year. The changes, I might add, are all to the good.

John Magnus, of *Vamp*, writes the guest editorial. He calls it "SF and the Masses," and he discusses what the term *science fiction* means to the outsider—the person who doesn't read it. He classifies non stf readers into three main groups: those who think science fiction is synonymous with weird; those who think it means fantasy; and those who think of it as purely a technical literature. He believes that everyone introduced to the right stf—right for the particular individual—would like it.

It's an interesting argument, though I fear I don't agree. Some people I'm sure, will never like anything weird, fantastic, or science fictional. I'm not counting those who don't like to read at all, either—they might like stf on TV. But some people are conditioned to like only what is completely realistic, or what they think of as realistic. And if the story doesn't fit the realistic reference frame—they will look for one that does. But not in a science fiction magazine. John thinks they're curable; I think they're hopeless.

* * *

DEVIANT: 20c; bimonthly; Carol McKinney, Sta. 1, Box 514, Provo, Utah. This fanzine runs some very good material. But why try to put the illustrations and text in the same place? It makes reading so much harder . . .

In a previous issue Lyle Kessler gave advice to young fans as to their relationship with BNF's (Big Name Fans). In this issue Rick Sneary writes an open letter in answer. Rick's points are, I believe, most telling ones—especially when he points out the distinctions between the actifan (active fan) and the so-called BNF. A refreshing course on semantics.

"Wind," by Don Howard Donnell, isn't science fiction, but it's very good writing. In non-fiction Dorothy Hansen tells what it was like to live in Oak Ridge, in the days before Hiroshima.

Also, this is the zine where you'll find Terry Carr's Face Critters.

* * *

KAYMAR: 10c or 4/25c; K. Martin Carlson, 1028 Third Ave. So., Moorhead, Minn. Here's the trading fanzine where you'll find listed for sale literally hundreds of science fiction books and magazines. You may run into some good bargains here, especially if what you're looking for is rather old.

Also, if you have stf or fantasy material to sell or swap you might try listing it here. If you're an ardent collector, or a real swapper, a trading zine like this one can be a real help.

* * *

SONIC: monthly; North Shore Futurian Society Notesheet, 24 Spencer Rd., Killara, Sydney, N.S.W.

Australia. Michael Bos and William George Hubble put out this Australian zine, which they sell by subscription thusly. If you're an overseas fan (overseas from Australia, that is) it costs you 5 US promags a year. I suppose for one promag you'd get a sample copy or two . . .

Sonic is a slim fanzine, mostly dealing with club notes and reviews of other clubs and fanzines. It's not a big zine; it doesn't have big name writers or columns. But if you're interested in contacting fans Down Under, this is a fine way to do so.

* * *

PSYCHOTIC: 10c; monthly; Richard Geis, 2631 N. Mississippi, Portland, Oregon. On this one I really slipped up—reviewed two months' issues last time and now don't have a new issue. But—if you haven't seen *Psy*, from Geis' covers through his madly titled columns and articles, you've missed something. Geis is perhaps the most original editor in the field right now; every new issue brings something new and thought-provoking, and often downright controversial. It's hard to see how this one could possibly get any better—but I've been saying that for months now.

My choice for the role of Number 1 fanzine. What's your opinion?

* * *

Well, that's all for this time. Remember, if you have any fanzines you want reviewed send them to me, Mari Wolf, *Fandora's Box*, IMAGINATION, P. O. Box 230, Evanston, Ill. See you next time . . .

—Mari Wolf

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CATALOGUES ISSUED



"The inhabitants seem to have an almost hypnotic effect on the younger members of the expedition!"

Letters from the Readers

A DIRTY JOB TO DO . . .

Dear Bill:

You may not know it, but I scooped you by two months on that Russian Space Station research news. Had me a real wild article about it in a fan magazine . . . anyway, the significant thing about the news is that it emphasized that this is a *Russian* show; they're not just listening to the wild schemes of some captive German rocket expert. German rocket experts are about all we have so far as you and I know—guys like Willy Ley, Wernher von Braun—who've been able to do little more than write "popular" books or articles on the subject of space travel. Of course, what you and I know may not be the whole story. But on the surface the Russians not only are listening to *their* experts, they're doing some acting on the matter!

However, scientific research has passed up us science-fictionists, again. New factors have arisen, particularly Clyde Tombaugh's new astronomical method, which

make a space station rather impractical as a military base. Turns out it wouldn't be very hard to knock down, once you got it up there!

But despite that, arguments are still valid about who should have control of such a base. Seems to me the question is simply whether such a base will result in a world police state dictatorship—and it seems to me that could happen even if the U. S. establishes the base first! If we kept control of it and used it to outlaw atomic warfare or any other such massacres, then we'll rule the Earth. And we'd always be afraid someone would discover a way to upset our rule, so we'd have to keep watch and move in on such shenanigans before they hit us. For that we'd need a world police force . . . we'd have to dictate laws to the rest of the world. Eventually and inevitably we'd have to establish a world dictatorship. The early medieval code of knighthood led to the feudalism of the Dark Ages in just this manner.

Still, it's perfectly true that if we dumped the responsibility for this base on the UN there'd be hell to pay. Russia might get its control away from the UN and we'd be hoist by our own petard. Certainly dumping it on the UN would be an invitation for the Kremlin to try just that maneuver.

Mostly, it would be a matter of our good diplomacy and careful timing. We'd have to keep control of the base for a while—and we'd have to set up some sort of world court where we preside as the judge and a Free World jury delivers the verdict. We already have that to a slight extent. Do you realize we could never launch an atomic attack over the Arctic against Russia if Canada refused to let us do it? Oh, we could—and millions of Can-

adians would be killed in the Russian counter-attack. So it's a simple fact that we *wouldn't*.

Where the good timing comes in, though, is when you consider the inherent nature of a police state. So long as the enslaved people can be taught to fear aggression from outside, as the Russians are told to fear a U. S. attack, the police state can keep them in line. So long as those people can be given continuous doses of egoboo—in the form of new conquests against "the enemy"—they'll support their masters. Look how the Kremlin hates NATO, and how they've screamed at the merest mention of a similar setup in Southeast Asia. A good military base in space would be better than any NATO. There could be no more conquests by any-

“With God... all things are possible!”

Are you facing difficult *Problems*? Poor Health? Money or Job Troubles? Love or Family Troubles? Are you *Worried* about someone dear to you? Is some one dear to you *Drinking too Much*? Do you ever get *Lonely*—*Unhappy*—*Discouraged*? Would you like to have more *Happiness*, *Success* and *“Good Fortune”* in *Life*?

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body, on fear of complete annihilation. There need be no more U. S. bomber bases ringing the "Glorious People's Paradise"; in fact, other nations could start disarming almost totally. What's going to happen to their fear of aggression? They'll have only that mysterious, unseen space base to fear; that kind of fear leads to hopelessness which will lead to corruption, which in turn will get the Russian people sick of everything and then things can happen internally.

So when the Communist empire crumbles, we'll have a world court controlling our space base. We can let the UN take over the judgeship of our world court and thereby become a true World Government, capable of enforcing its decrees wherever necessary.

The whole thing boils down to one not-so-simple fact; maybe we all want peace, but none of us will ever get it without justice, and we will keep it only so long as we have justice.

That means somebody has a dirty job to do.

Joe Gibson
24 Kensington Ave.
Jersey City 4, N. J.

Our editorial on the Russian research into producing a space station was "dated" only because it took over two months to get the issue on the stands—from the time we wrote the editorial . . . We'll bypass your observation that perhaps a space station is no longer a practical idea—since we don't agree, period. Your views on control of a space base are based on fairly logical reasoning, as far as

we can see. Whole nubbin is the fact that to achieve lasting peace we'll have to take the bit in our own teeth and ignore the wailing from the gallery. Once a positive step has been taken, it will give a rallying point for others to cling to. All this word tossing between allies today does nothing but get everything in a worse muddle than before. The world struggle for peace reminds us somewhat of a band of chefs endeavoring to create a subtle soup; each one adds an ingredient—and one or more others present immediately disagree and add ingredients of their own to counteract the original ingredient. After a few years of such adding and counteracting, your soup becomes a horror to behold—let alone taste. What is needed is a master chef with a new and vital ingredient. That chef is the USA, and the ingredient may well be a space station. We must take positive leadership in a world of fence-straddlers and do-nothings. We have the means and the power but we do nothing with it ourselves! We must have the courage of our own convictions—and if we're right—that man can live peacefully on this planet—we're the nation to make the dream a reality. Police state? True we'd have to exercise unilateral decisions, but we feel the role of the US would be more of a benevolent protector, than a police state. Big point is that while we yak ourselves silly, Russia is going ahead and doing something about a space station. If she beats us up there, Joe, that dirty job you talk about will become an impossible one. And then heaven help us all! . . . wh

CITIZENS OF SPACE!

Dear wh:

Anyone see a missing space station? I am now in the process of throwing my hat in the ring. I am confident that before this little squabble is finished, somebody is going to step on it—or maybe we'll all sit around glowering at each other while Russia goes ahead and puts up their own—first!

There is, I feel, a basic fallacy in all the arguments advanced so far as to who should control a space station. Actually, it would not be a nation up there in the station—just a few men. When they look down on Earth they won't see nations, they'll see a planet. Boundary lines are little things on maps. To a man in space there will be no

barriers between a man and his brother. The men who go into space will be the first truly *world citizens*.

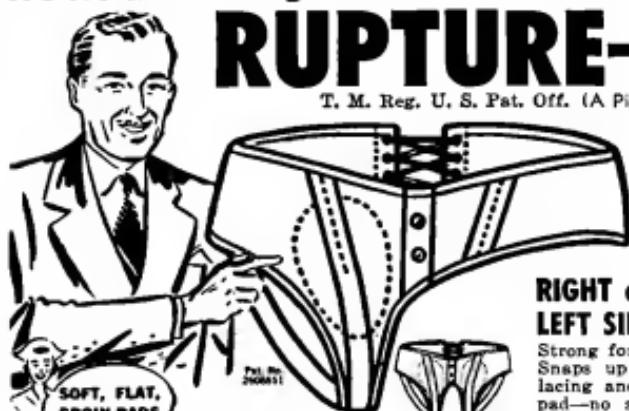
There are four things they can do; 1. They can remain faithful to the government that put them there. 2. They could give their services to another nation. 3. They could decide to conquer the Earth. 4. They can decide to set up a better government; a world government that would work better than existing ones.

I do not know who will put up a space station first, but there is one thing of which I am certain. Before a space station is built, the country building it will have some means of destroying it. If we build it we would certainly want a checkmate move in case of emergency—

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IMAGINATION

even from those trusted with its safekeeping upstairs. I know that if I were in a space station and I received orders to blow another country into ruin I would refuse, and might find that a convenient moment to try to set up a world government.

You ask what is to prevent Russia from taking over a UN space station. Just this. A space station will be completely dependent on Earth for its supplies. If the USA created one and handed it over to the UN, we would have the trump card since it would be American rockets that would keep the supply line open. Russia wouldn't have these ships so how could she take it over?

John Courtois
318 E. Commercial St.
Appleton, Wisc.

It is true that men in space will not be able to see "boundary lines" on the Earth below them; but they will know that boundary lines do exist and that on the surface of the planet these lines remain a problem as long as some look with envy on the backyard of their neighbors. So these "citizens of space" who are still Earthbound—remember, this is not interplanetary travel—just the first step toward it—will do the job they were sent up to do, to wit: be a watchdog for the peace of the world. To answer your points: 1. We imagine the men in the space station would be carefully screened so their loyalty would not be a questionable factor; even if it were, there would undoubtedly be a built-in destroying mechanism to safeguard against a treasonable act as you suggested.

2. Same safeguard as before. 3. Same safeguard. However, we can't see carefully chosen men becoming revolutionists. We assume they would possess enough intelligence to know that our government is capable of doing the job right in the first place otherwise they wouldn't have been sent into space to begin with! As to your final point, on preventing Russia from taking over a UN space station, what, pray tell, leads you to believe the Reds wouldn't have rockets capable of reaching the base? Keep in mind the fact that Russia has made a space station—and interplanetary travel—an official project. We'll have to race them for the goal instead of sitting idly on our bottoms. Granting that we win the race, we don't want some UN delegates up there who'll welcome Russia's first military move; we want some hardened American soldiers manning the guns alongside our scientist crewmen . . . wh

OUR "CHEAP" WRAPPER

Dear Mr. Hamling:

Your letter from Jim Harmon in the July issue, and your reply, brought to mind a point I have been intending to bring up for some time.

To quote you (page 126) " . . . how could you ever have looked at Madge as just a cheap pulp?" It is real easy. It is especially easy if the purchaser is unfamiliar with the magazine. I buy Madge despite the cover, not because of it! I feel that you have dressed a rather charming, interesting, and entertaining lady in clothes and makeup

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suitable for a barroom brawl.

In the first place the colors of your covers are garish in the extreme. They would be fine for an attention-getting billboard, but they look cheap on a newsstand. Then too, the composition and basic design of the cover scenes are just as unsubtle as the colors. And the gals that you can put on your covers in various stages of undress!

Clothes, of course, are a state of mind. Witness the woman who wouldn't be caught dead in a bathrobe—from her adam's apple to the floor—because she is "undressed". The same woman is "dressed" in shorts and halter if it is a picnic. Clothing is a state of mind, not a matter of yardage. If you ignore this fact you run smack into bad taste. Some of the scenes in which a gal is depicted on Madge's covers would hardly call for shorts and a halter! Technology may change drastically in a couple hundred years, but people won't.

I can sympathize with Sheri Flows (her letter in the July issue). Her parents are probably of the same opinion that I was before reading Madge. The illustrations are a cross between the Police Gazette, modern detective, and a confessions magazine. At first glance the magazine looks cheap, and I am not at all surprised that a teenager's mother or father would disapprove of her reading it. I am an independent thinking, married woman, decidedly out of my teens, and still have gotten some raised eyebrows from non-initiates over my selection of reading material—Madge. I personally don't care, but I can see that it would

be difficult for a teenager with parents—at an age when their opinions are enforceable, not just academically interesting.

Madge's stories are certainly not selected to appeal to high grade morons or semi-literates. So why give the wrong impression by the type of cover and inside illustrations that you use?

After all the brickbats, you should know that I feel you do a fine job of selecting entertaining stories—of just the kind that can be read for relaxation and enjoyment. You know that people read for fun—a factor too frequently ignored by other magazines!

Mary Dyer

22½ West 17th St.

Eugene, Ore.

If you knew what Madge's covers cost you would hardly refer to them as cheap, Mary! But seriously, your opinions make sense to us—up to a point. When you speak of bright colors, referring them to billboards to catch the eye—just what purpose other than that does a magazine cover achieve? Magazine covers—and take a good look at your newsstand—employ color, design, and subject matter combined to catch your eye, to make you interested enough to pick up the book. Why do we usually include a pretty girl in what you choose to call "various stages of undress"? Well, frankly, we never tire of looking at pretty girls. When we do we'll be ready for retirement—but completely! However, we don't feel that Madge's cover girls are anything but very attractive examples of the fair sex, and what's wrong with that? Take the beau-

tiful McCauley cover on this issue. What could be nicer, huh? We agree with you when you say that clothes are a state of mind. We'd only add that pretty cover gals are too. They keep most of us in a pleasant state! wlh

ERUDITE FRIENDS . . .

Dear Bill:

Have read stf for years now. And, I might add, I read all I can get despite my friends and relatives who have the attitude I'm just a bit wacky for reading such nonsense!

Madge is my favorite of them all. It does get a bit trying, though, when friends drop in, pick up *Madge*, *Astounding*, or *Galaxy*, raise their eyebrows and say, "Oh, do you read that stuff?"

Sometimes I wonder if I am wacky for liking stf, or if there are other people who have similar tastes in reading! So far I've had no luck in getting my friends to read one of the magazines. All I've done is manage to lose a copy here and there—they never return them!

Now that I've got this gripe off my chest I'll close saying I'll be happy if you just keep *Madge* coming my way!

Ethel Burke
46 Whitfield Place

Mt. Tabor, N. J.

Rest assured you'll be kept happy for a long time to come, Ethel! As for your unenlightened friends, perhaps the reason they haven't returned your copies is because they are secretly loaning them out themselves! At any rate, don't give up on them—keep plugging stf! . . . wlh

PARENTS TAKE NOTE

Dear Bill:

Sheri Flowe's letter in the July *Madge* bothered me considerably and I know from your reply that you've had similar letters before.

However, it's an old complaint, and not peculiar to the science fiction field, that people who do not understand—parents in particular—should take their kids to task for spending money on "silly magazines". But here's a true-life experience that may throw some light on the subject and prove that the people who do not understand, P. I. P., may be wrong.

My teenage daughter for many years refused to read except when forced to do so by teachers at school. She was active, the out-door type, and her need for escape was amply supplied by radio, and in recent years, TV. She also went to every change in movies at our neighborhood theater. This was a social contact at first, since she always went with others. But somehow she became interested in movies as an industry. She read movie magazines. All her spending money went for movie magazines and I used to say: "If you'd spend half the money you spend on movie magazines on something useful!"

But lo and behold, this taught her to read. She now enjoys reading books and other magazines—I even caught her reading one of George Bernard Shaw's plays recently. And she even reads her dad's science fiction stories. My one true fan, by the way!

So, in general, I'd say that any-

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thing that encourages reading is good so long as it doesn't degrade a person morally (and science fiction doesn't do that, as all of us know). Reading is becoming a lost art, but science fiction is a weapon or perhaps a dike to check the disaster. I don't care if a non-reader reads seed catalogues because I know that reading has to start somewhere and it should be encouraged. And much can be learned from science fiction.

Russ Winterbotham
1582 Woodward
Lakewood 7, Ohio

Your analysis of the problem is a good one, Russ, and we hope that many parents who object to stf as a "worthwhile reading" will take note of what you say. The irony of the situation is that science fiction is not only worthwhile reading, but educational—to a larger extent than any other "popular" type. We are embarking on a new era in mankind's history of modern science; it

is science fiction, and science fiction alone which fosters thinking about the future — which is just around the corner! wlh

BETRAYED, HE SAYS!

Dear wlh:

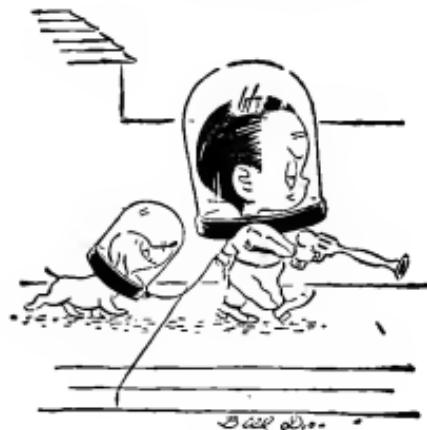
Have read *Madge* since Volume 1, Number 1, and in my opinion it's tops in the field.

Now that the back-slapping is over with I'd like to register a couple of beefs. Why oh why give away the punch line with the story illustration? When I saw the illo for MESSENGER I felt like a guy in line for a movie and some creep comes out and yells, "The butler did it!" One doesn't have to be a genius to figure out the guy with the horn must be: Little Boy Blue, Louis Armstrong, or GABRIEL!

The author and I were betrayed by you, ed.

Also, BIRTHDAY PRESENT shouldn't be classified as science fic-

LITTLE LUNCEFORD



tion, not to mention the fact the plot has been used in murder stories, radio programs, etc. But don't cry, old pot, you can't bat a thousand all the time!

I especially enjoy Henry Bott's book reviews. His remarks on Isaac Asimov's *SECOND FOUNDATION* were sad but true. My head ached when I finished the book!

Bud Stephensen
32 Tilden Cres.

Weston, Ont., Canada

And we thought we were being subtle with the illo for MESSENGER! We bow our heads in shame.

(S)ELECTION TIME!

Dear Mr. Hamling:

Jim Harmon's letter has sparked

me to conduct a poll. Jim mentioned Carol McKinney's poll of 300 active fans' cross-section preference on science fiction magazines. I herewith launch a nation-wide poll for all readers to vote. Simply drop me a line with your name and address, a card will do, listing your five favorite science fiction magazines in order of preference.

I'll give you the results as soon as available!

Stephen A. Kallis, Jr.
282 Main St.

Winchester, Mass.

*Ok, gang, send Steve your votes. See you all next month, and don't forget to get Madge's new companion magazine at your favorite newsstand — *IMAGINATIVE TALES* —featuring TOFFEE! 'Nuff said. . . . wlh*

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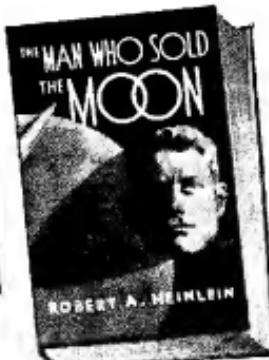
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